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**Queerbaiting and Heteronormativity in Contemporary Media**

*Rizzoli & Isles and Supergirl*

Dissertação de Mestrado em Estudos de Cultura, Literatura e Línguas Modernas, Ramo  
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## Queerbaiting and Heteronormativity in Contemporary Media

### *Rizzoli & Isles and Supergirl*

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Most texts produced in popular culture are heteronormative, and until this changes, queer youth will continue to employ their imagination and engage in interpretative reading practices.  
(Lipton, 2008)

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## Abstract

As more and more TV Shows with queer representation have been released, more controversial debates on queerbaiting and stereotypical representations of queer characters have been produced. “Queerbaiting” is a pejorative term with a variety of different meanings that mostly equate to the idea of hinting at a same-sex relationship or queer representation that is never actualized on screen, which is a technique often used on TV to lure in queer fans without alienating heterosexual mainstream audiences. This obvious marketing ploy, very similar to “the pink dollar”, leads to troubled relationships between the audiences and producers with the former accusing the latter of exploiting a powerless minority. At the same time, when the queer content does appear on screen it often plays into generic stereotypes, that leaves queer fans unsatisfied, frequently with one dimensional characters that never leave the side-lines. It is safe to say, therefore, that fans do not ever feel represented by stereotypes and even deem them as harmful representations of queer communities by constantly reinforcing tropes that, while not fake, are not the only reality of queer people. The issue then seems to lay with what is a good representation of the different realities within the queer community.

This study will address these issues by analyzing the TV Show *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010-2016), which was accused of developing a close homoerotic bond between the female leads for marketing purposes with the intent of alluring the queer community. To do so, a close analysis of text will be done as it shows how it was kept purposely ambiguous to encourage different interpretations. Furthermore, techniques such as lighting and background music will also be explored as they have a fundamental role in the subliminal messages passed onto viewers. Regarding queer representation, the TV Show *Supergirl* (2015-2021), whose queer representation – of transgender and lesbian characters – was praised by fans and critics as “authentic” and progressive, will be analyzed. Although progressive, it was also accused of queerbaiting due to the homoerotic tension between the female leads. Moreover, the queer representations allowed to best expose how the different representations are negotiated by fans to be approved as “good” or as “bad”. Both shows were adapted to TV, thus making them interesting as it allows the exposure of the differences between the original work and the televised adaption. In both, romantic relationships were altered to better fit the interests of the network and,

although there is not full creative liberty, it is important to analyze how these differences affected the inclusion, or lack thereof, of queer characters.

The main objective of this work is to present how these two TV Series spanning from 2010 to 2020 used queerbaiting techniques to reinforce heteronormativity and consequently what the reactions from fans and critics was to this obvious marketing ploy. Although a major focus is to be put into the reaction that fans display regarding the different queer representations on screen, this study will not analyze statistics concerning fan studies. To better elucidate on how queerbaiting techniques developed on screen are successful, and how differently they are perceived by fans, concepts such as gender performativity and queer readings will be used, as they explain the continuous employment of such tactics, as well as the inherent criticism originating from their use.

The first part of this thesis will develop the intent producers have in deliberately queerbaiting the audience, through an analysis of the relationship between the producers/cast of *Rizzoli and Isles* (2010-2016) and the audience, as it explains best the very complex relationships between a supposed power/powerless relationship. In addition, the way heteronormativity plays into the accusations of queerbaiting will also be analyzed, as this show frequently delivers heavy handed homoerotic subtext to then quickly put together one of the main characters in a heterosexual relationship.

The second part of this thesis will then approach what fans seem to consider a good or a bad representation of queerness in media. With this purpose, the focus is on *Supergirl* (2015-2021), as it contains queer characters which can be explored in depth to better understand what tropes are associated with them, how they are depicted on screen and how fans, while having different perceptions of what counts as good representations, frequently advocate for “happy endings” which usually play into heteronormative ideologies. Furthermore, this particular TV Series is interesting because it plays directly into Michael McDermot’s explanation on the importance of centrality and how fans tend to more easily become interested in the two “straight” characters, instead of the already established queer characters.

**Keywords:** Heteronormativity, Queerbaiting, Compulsory Heterosexuality, Homosocial Bonding, Queer Representation.

## Resumo

À medida que são lançados programas de televisão com representações queer, debates mais controversos sobre ‘queerbaiting’ e representações estereotipadas de personagens queer são também simultaneamente produzidos. “Queerbaiting” é um termo pejorativo com uma variedade de diferentes significados que, na sua maioria, equivalem à ideia de insinuar uma relação entre pessoas do mesmo sexo, ou uma representação queer que nunca se concretiza no ecrã, uma técnica frequentemente utilizada na televisão para atrair o/as fãs queer, sem alienar o público heterossexual. Esta óbvia manobra de marketing, muito semelhante ao “dólar cor-de-rosa”, leva a relações problemáticas entre o público e os produtores, sendo que o primeiro acusa os segundos de explorar uma minoria sem poder. Consecutivamente, quando o conteúdo queer aparece de facto no ecrã, recorre frequentemente a estereótipos genéricos, o que deixa os fãs queer insatisfeitos, pois os enredos utilizados raramente se desenvolvem, tornando assim estas personagens unidimensionais. Desta forma, os fãs não se sentem representados pelos estereótipos, sendo que, em certas instâncias, até os consideram prejudiciais para a comunidade, uma vez que reforçam tropos que, embora não sejam falsos, não são a única realidade queer. A problemática reside, desta forma, no que é uma boa representação das diferentes realidades da comunidade queer.

Este estudo abordará estas questões através da análise da série televisiva *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010-2016), acusada de estabelecer uma ligação homoerótica entre as protagonistas femininas para fins de marketing, com o objetivo de atrair a comunidade queer. Para o efeito, será feita uma análise atenta do texto, que demonstra como este foi mantido propositadamente ambíguo para encorajar diferentes interpretações. Para além disso, serão também exploradas técnicas como a iluminação e a música de fundo, uma vez que estas têm um papel fundamental nas mensagens subliminares transmitidas aos espectadores. Será analisada a série televisiva *Supergirl* (2015-2021), cuja representação queer, de personagens transgénero a lésbicas, esta foi elogiada pelos fãs e pela crítica como “autêntica” e progressista. No entanto, foi também acusada de ‘queerbaiting’ devido à tensão homoerótica entre as protagonistas femininas. Além disso, as representações queer em *Supergirl* permitem expor os critérios utilizados pelos fãs para serem aprovadas como “boas” ou “más”. Ambas foram adaptadas para a televisão, o que as torna interessantes, pois demonstra as diferenças entre a obra original e a adaptação

televisiva. Em ambas, os relacionamentos românticos foram alterados para melhor se adequarem aos interesses da emissora e, embora não haja total liberdade criativa, é importante analisar como essas diferenças afetaram a inclusão ou não de personagens queer.

O principal objetivo deste trabalho é apresentar a forma como estas duas séries televisivas, que vão de 2010 a 2020, utilizaram técnicas de ‘queerbaiting’ para reforçar a heteronormatividade e, conseqüentemente, quais foram as reações de fãs e críticos a esta óbvia manobra de marketing. Embora se pretenda dar maior ênfase à recepção dos fãs relativamente às diferentes representações queer no ecrã, não serão analisadas estatísticas relativas a estudos de audiências. Para melhor elucidar como as técnicas de ‘queerbaiting’ desenvolvidas no ecrã são bem-sucedidas e como são diferentemente percebidas pelos fãs, serão utilizados conceitos como a performatividade de género e leituras queer, que explicam o emprego contínuo de tais táticas, bem como as frequentes críticas inerentes à sua utilização.

A primeira parte examinará a intenção dos produtores de aliciar deliberadamente o público para conteúdos queer através de uma análise da relação entre os produtores/elenco de *Rizzoli and Isles* (2010-2016) e o público, porque explica melhor as relações muito complexas entre uma suposta relação de poder/sem poder. Para além disso, serão também expostas as diferentes formas que permitem às táticas de queerbaiting assegurar a predominância da heteronormatividade, sendo que as acusações de queerbaiting também serão analisadas, uma vez que este programa apresenta frequentemente um recheado subtexto homoerótico.

A segunda parte abordará o que os fãs parecem considerar uma boa ou má representação de ‘queerness’ nos media. Assim, o foco recai sobre *Supergirl* (2015-2021), pois contém personagens queer que podem ser explorados em profundidade para compreender quais os tropos que lhes estão associados, como são representados no ecrã e como os fãs, embora tendo percepções diferentes do que é uma boa representação, defendem “finais felizes” que se enquadram em ideologias heteronormativas. Para além disso, esta série enquadra-se diretamente na explicação do crítico Michael McDermot sobre a importância da centralidade e como os fãs tendem a interessar-se mais facilmente pelas duas personagens “heterossexuais”, em vez das personagens queer já estabelecidas.

**Palavras-chave:** heteronormatividade, ‘queerbaiting’, heterossexualidade compulsória, laços homosociais, representação queer.



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## 1. Introduction

In the last few years matters related to Queerness have not only been increasing but have become more and more ingrained into our society. Pride Month, an event dedicated to the celebration of queer identities, has been absorbed by capitalism and nowadays works in a way that allows companies (for instance in the clothing industry) to release their “pride month collection”. Besides this, companies also change the color of their logos to the rainbow associated with the queer community, clearly signposting to their customers, and to the market, their allegiance to the movement. Although some have criticized them for using this obvious marketing ploy as a way of seeming progressive, it is still a very popular event that has seen increasing amounts of traction by raising awareness to the issues faced by the queer community, while at the same time celebrating their history, progress and above all, their pride. Furthermore, in 2020 Pope Francis acknowledged that he supported same-sex civil unions, even though it is not the support of same-sex marriage this is still a rather unprecedented event (Horowitz, 2021).<sup>1</sup> In 2022, the USA tried to pass a landmark bill that protects same-sex marriage (Karni, 2022).<sup>2</sup> Concurrently, in 2022 controversy arose during the world cup when FIFA prevented team captains from wearing rainbow-colored armbands (“OneLove”), since it was being hosted in Qatar, which still criminalizes LGBTQIA+ individuals (Ioanes, 2022).<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, it is uplifting to see many team captains and even federations openly criticize FIFA not only for their mismanagement, but also for allowing the world cup to be hosted in a country that enforces policies that still go against human rights.

In recent years, many events have occurred that allowed the Queer community to be seen and to claim their rights. A reason for this to happen has to do with the activism of the queer community in the past to gain the same rights as heterosexuals. In the United States, movements such as the Stonewall riots in 1969, in which customers of the Stonewall Inn, in New York’s Greenwich Village, fought against police raids, were a turning point in Queer history. Later, more movements and actions followed, but during the 1980s a setback was suffered as the AIDS epidemic devastated a high number of individuals in the community and its consequences are still seen nowadays. In 2011,

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/21/world/europe/pope-francis-same-sex-civil-unions.html> for more information on Pope Francis’ religious position on same-sex unions. Accessed 5 Dec. 2022.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/08/us/politics/same-sex-marriage-congress.html> Accessed 12 Dec. 2022.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.vox.com/2022/12/3/23477966/qatar-anti-lgbtq-fifa-world-cup> for more information on the anti-LGBTQIA+ policies at the 2022 World Cup. Accessed 9 Dec. 2022.

President Obama repelled the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” doctrine, which had been created to prevent people from the LGBTQIA+ community to serve in the military. In 2015, the US Court ruled that all states must be required to recognize same-sex marriages and to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. All these changes are directly connected not only to activism. But also to on-screen displays of queer characters and relationships, as they helped shape the public opinion on the lives of queer people and also the way we view and understand our own identities as well as those of others (Walker, 2019, p.2).

Since the focus here is on the queer community, a question that might be raised is why the acronym LGBTQIA+ is not used, rather opting for using term *queer*. To begin with, the letters indicate which sexualities are being represented, however, with already so many characters, a + sign was used to represent all the other possible sexualities. Thus, it is my contention that using the letters to refer to a community whose identities are not explicitly depicted defeats the purpose of using a specific letter for each sexuality. More importantly, the use of the queer word, inherently implies that in its nature we are talking about an excluded community whose members have always been oppressed, concurrently, it is a word that implies the otherization of those who do not conform to the norms.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the LGBTQIA+ community was yet to be established when producers were already writing characters whose codes could be read as representations of different sexualities. Therefore, staying true to the original term was better, since we are dealing with a marginalized community that represents the “other”.

## **The complexity of Queerbaiting**

Looking back, the word “queerbaiting” had a variety of different meanings,

In 1981, it was used as a description of verbal abuse and the homophobic and discriminating rhetoric in US courts. As recently as 2009, the word was used to describe the attempt to “expose” and purge homosexual individuals in the US during the 1950s and ’60s. (Nordin, 2019, p.25-26)

From this point onwards, the term changed and nowadays it is mostly found in social media apps like Tumblr, where minorities frequently gather, or fan forums and communities dedicated to the discussion of specific shows. It is used whenever producers

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<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, with notions of positive representations being linked to heteronormativity, its depictions are quite far from what queerness represents.

intentionally use queer characters and/or content to lure in (bait) queer audiences, as they normally have quite an online presence and frequently allow TV Series to trend worldwide on social media, without ever actualizing said content or characters on-screen. This is a loose explanation of what fans mean when they use the term “queerbaiting”, since it is a popular term and there is not a single standard definition, however, the explanation given above is similar to the one used by theorists. The term, however, will be further developed in the following pages.

It is also important to know that because audiences have so frequently felt lured by queer subtext, nowadays, as opposed to the 90s, there is a constant advocating for queer characters to be explicitly queer. By explicit, fans not only want queer characters as part of the narrative but that they also want them to be actualized on screen. An example of this is Valkyrie from *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), since, before the movie was released, there were not only rumors but both the director Taika Waititi and the actress who plays her, Tessa Thompson, mentioned that the movie would have queer representation (Nordin, 2019 p.38). However, after release, there was no actual representation of a queer character on screen, which led to criticism by the fans, so much so that Tessa Thompson took it to Twitter to explain that the character wasn't explicitly queer on screen. Had it been the case, it would have been groundbreaking, since Valkyrie is a bisexual woman played by a woman of color in one of the biggest marvel franchises (Raymond, 2017).<sup>5</sup> Although fan outrage is understandable, different factors play into explicitly portraying a queer character on film, specially one that is part of the Thor Franchise.<sup>6</sup> While analyzing the complex world of the film industry and its connections with the queer world is out of the scope of this work, when it comes to big film studios, money is the biggest concern. Therefore, if outright depicting a queer character leads the film to be, if not banned, at the very least censored and its rating changed, then studios will not risk it by including characters and/or scenes with queer themes. The recent movie *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them: The Secrets of Dumbledore* (2022), is a perfect example of the censorship, since the scene in which Albus Dumbledore confesses to having been in love with Gellert Grindelwald was cut in Chinese theatres (Child, 2022).<sup>7</sup> Thus, whereas it is

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<sup>5</sup> <https://screenrant.com/thor-ragnarok-valkyrie-bisexual-tessa-thompson/> Accessed 23 Jan. 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Being the Thor franchise a part of Marvel's Cinematic Universe which ranks number one has the highest-grossing superhero films and series it is understandable that Disney did not want any possible controversial themes in the movie that could lead the movie to either be banned or partially censored.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/apr/15/fantastic-beasts-secrets-of-dumbledore-china-gay-censorship> for more information on the consequences of censoring queer relationships. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

understandable that fans voice their displeasure, it must be acknowledged that producers and directors frequently face a lot of pressure from the studios into not releasing content that might get banned in other regions of the world. Although this is also the case of TV, in it the dynamics between network/producers/audiences is slightly altered and much more effective, and these relationships will be approached in later chapters.

As shown, queerbaiting has been a rather developed term, not only in fan communities but also in academia. In recent years, many scholars, such as Joseph Brennan, Michael McDermott, Emma Nordin, and Judith Fathallah have researched not only on the effects of queerness in media but also on what has been termed bromance, and its reinforcement of heteronormativity. This work, therefore, will be drawing on those essays as they have researched and studied how queerbaiting has turned into a political term, for instance, for communities playing into victimhood to further reinforce their lack of power, or its shift into a term used whenever there are “bad” representations of the queer community, such as stereotypical behaviors and storylines that rarely fall outside of finding one’s identity. Furthermore, there is the constant advocating for characters to be explicitly queer, which, while pitching the queer community as progressive for fighting for their rights, also reinforces the power attached to binary and hegemonic discourses, creating a vicious cycle. Within this cycle, there is no space for non-explicit sexualities, as there is not the possibility of developing sexually fluid characters, thus creating a closed loop that does not allow for diversity and inclusiveness. Furthermore, fans advocate for more diversity on TV, not only on screen but also when it comes to the writers and executive producers. This is preferred because fans feel that “straight-white-cis men” cannot fully grasp the identities and struggles of the queer community and therefore fill TV Shows with queer stereotypes. From *Ellen* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, groups of producers and writers are rarely comprised of people who belong to minorities, thus when it comes to representing storylines with characters belonging to those minorities, stereotypes are the frequent go to. However, this brings in two contradictory ideas, first, that straight people cannot see “queer” but queer people can see “straight”; second, it goes against the often-used argument “even my straight friends can see that they are queerbaiting”. McDermott approaches these issues in *The Affective Politics of Queerbaiting: Fandom, Identity and Representation*, by mentioning identity politics and how, in the case of queerness, it frequently is set in a very fixed notion of what is and can be queer (2020, p.77-79).

## 1.1 The problematic of Good and Bad Representations

Queerbaiting, as a term, has been developing over the last few years, not only because of the reasons shown above but also because in recent years fans have been asking for better representations. At first, in the 1970s and 80s, queer characters were mostly present in a few episodes per season. The TV Show *All in the Family* (1971), for instance, had gay characters as guest stars, who were either the driving point of the narrative (their sexuality frequently being a cause of some disruption in their life), or they appeared as a distanced relative or friend of one of the main characters (Netzley, 2010, p.969). But, in this time period, queerness was still frequently written as the butt of a joke (Cook, 2018, p.11). Either way, not only were their appearances quite sporadic, thus failing to provide any possible representation of the queer community, but they also perpetuated the idea of queer people as individuals that lived on the margins of society, far from the main characters that represent the average middle-class white American family. Concurrently, if the characters were part of the main cast, they were frequently represented in a neutral manner, so much so that a fan even complained about this celibacy regarding the gay character in *Melrose Place* (1992-1999), “Why can’t this man get laid?” (McDermott, 2020, p.51). This inability of queer characters to show not only desire but even affection comes mostly from the fear of the audience’s reactions to explicit homoerotic content.

After the TV Show *Ellen* (1994-1998) had the lesbian main character (Ellen) come out on the national broadcasting channel ABC, the media covered this matter in a way that portrayed her coming out as a “major” mark for queer communities, since it showed, that networks were becoming more accepting of queer main characters. The show was quickly cancelled after the outing of its main character and while progressive, the writers, as analyzed by Anna McCarthy in “Ellen Making Queer Television History” (2001), seemed to have an increased difficulty in not only developing the character after its coming out, but also in developing narratives that took into consideration Ellen’s lesbianism. Although the idea was to show progressiveness, executives were concerned that *Ellen* was “too gay”, thus alienating mainstream heterosexual audiences: “[Ellen] became a program about a character who was gay every single week, and ... that was too much for people.” (McCarthy, 2001, p. 596). Regarding representation, as McCarthy writes, the TV Show frequently compared the representation of queer minorities with racial minorities. Even though both groups face discrimination and are frequently

misrepresented on TV, these issues are quite different from one minority to another, as they both inherently contain specific economic and cultural factors that are not mutual to both sides.

What McCarthy aimed to criticize was how important Ellen had been to the queer community in order to compare the feats of the TV show to those of Rosa Parks' bus boycott. Theorists criticize portrayals that represent whiteness as the blank canvas, in other words, white characters are represented as the body through which new sexualities are explored and in which issues of gender and class are frequently put aside. Moreover, even in fan studies there seems to be an absence of the development of race as a subject, as Mel Stanfill writes in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*: "In the media fandoms that fan studies tends to focus on, which I'll call Predominantly White Fandoms, engagement with race is similarly present but not prevalent." (2018, p.402). Queerness is frequently applied to the white characters, leaving queer characters of color to the side-lines. Moreover, in the years leading up to *Ellen* there were scarcely any queer characters of color (Capsuto, 2000, p.313). On this matter, McDermott (2020) approached the subject of whiteness and how fans frequently seem to apply the queerbaiting term whenever a white same-sex couple does not become cannon, while at the same time having queer characters of color. It is important to understand that these moments occur frequently, since queerbaiting has also been transformed into a term employed by fans when the representations are deemed bad, unappealing, or non-correspondent with the fans' expectations. That said, what counts as good or as bad representation is not only ambiguous, but it inherently plays into the expectations of each viewer, making it so that fandoms frequently argue over what is "problematic" and should/should not count as queer representation.

*Ellen*, although groundbreaking at the time, was not seen as the best representation, since not only did the narrative become stale, but writers could also not balance Ellen's lesbianism with the comedic narrative. Being a popular sitcom, it is also important to bear in mind that during this period, as shown by Carson in *A Content Analysis of LGBT Representation on Broadcast and Streaming Television* (2018), not only were the appearances of queer characters reserved to the side lines, but their sexualities were also mostly played for jokes made by heterosexual characters. In addition, Carson also draws on a 2001 study, which compares the percentage of queer characters in national broadcasting stations in opposition to cable and streaming. However, that study concerned in a post-Ellen age in which queer representations were

still scarce, filled with stereotypes, mostly neutralized, and occurred mainly on cable (Cook, 2018, p.11).

On the matter of queer characters in national broadcasting television, *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) is a perfect example of a filtered version of queerness. It aired right after *Ellen* ended, in 1998, and it contained not only one but two out queer characters, Will and Jack. Will is the main character and Jack is his best friend and even though they are both out gay men, they are very subdued in their relationships with other men and on screen displays of affection are quite rare. Furthermore, Will, being the most masculine of the two gay characters, shares a heavily coded heterosexual relationship with Grace – they kiss, cuddle and even share beds. In addition, whenever there is a conflict that involves Will's sexuality, the narrative is played out in a way that shows the viewer that, even if Will is interested in other men, his relationship with Grace is more important and given precedence. In one episode, a gay couple is shown getting married, yet the focus is on Will and Grace as they come down the altar (having resolved a conflict), thus reinforcing not only their status as a couple but also heteronormative views of partnerships between men and women. In addition, the dynamic between the four main characters portrays Will and Grace as Jack and Karen's parents, therefore maintaining the heteronormative nuclear family, even if slightly different from the average American family. Simultaneously, the relationship among these characters can also be read as a queer family whose struggles are shared, thus deviating from patriarchal notions of nuclear families.

While a rather progressive TV Show, when it comes to queer representation, the early 1990-2000s was still rather neutral. However, as the scope of this work is mostly going to focus on queer relationships between women, it is in its best interest to mention *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), hitherto referred to as X: WP. This show, depicting the female equivalent of Hercules, managed to stay on air for six seasons with heavy handed lesbian subtext, as opposed to *Ellen* that was quickly cancelled after the main character came out as lesbian. Due to this and to the nature of this work regarding not only representation but also queerbaiting, it is best to understand how the audience not only found enjoyment in the queer subtext but even praised the producers for increasing it, in the later seasons. Even though in this era there were already some out queer characters, they were neither the main character, nor were they allowed to show any displays of affection. In films, queer characters were mostly represented through tragic stories that resulted in either their death or in shunning from the community they were



inserted in. At same time, in the after-AIDS era, there was a need to represent characters as neutral to do away with representations of queerness as promiscuous and shallow.

In *X: WP*, the overall consensus in the community was that Xena and Gabrielle (her sidekick and deuteragonist) were together, although Xena was not a lesbian (Squires, 2021).<sup>8</sup> The producer even mentioned that the studio did not want the introduction to contain scenes of female leads together because they were concerned that audiences would read them as a lesbian couple (Randell-Moon, 2019, p.113). The subtext clearly played into queer readings, as the characters also had very explicit displays of affection on screen, from sharing baths to kissing several times. This was done while never outright proclaiming themselves as a romantic couple nor as lesbians, which in all likelihood allowed the show to be on air for a longer time. That said, how did fans never shun or tried to sabotage the network and the producers is what I aim to delve deep into, as it serves as a starting point for producer/audience relationships, as well as an interesting view on the power/powerless relationships inherent in media.

Regarding how the subtext was received, not only did the producers encourage fans to create their own explicit versions of the text through fanfics (Hanmer, 2014, p.611), fan arts, and other fan produced works, but, in the later seasons, there were almost no male interests for Xena and the affection between her and Gabrielle increased. During this time, even with other shows having out queer characters, the fandom did not shame the producers or the network for not explicitly stating that the characters where in a relationship and naturally this occurred because it was out of the producers' hands to actualize the queer content. Nevertheless, blatant displays of affection and intimacy between female characters have been more tolerated than between men, which is why Xena and Gabrielle frequently kissed and shared a domestic life with each other. Moreover, lesbianism is also tolerated if represented for the male-gaze in a way that generates heterosexual stimulation (Randell-Moon, 2019, p.114).

During the 1990s, the term “HoYay” – short for homoeroticism yay –, reclaimed today by Joseph Brennan and Michael McDermott as an alternative to queerbaiting (Brenan, 2016, p.14), was popular and was wildly used within fan communities to celebrate any type of queer subtext. However, at that time there were no talks of drawing in the queer community by promising queer content that was never delivered. Because of

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<sup>8</sup> Producer Rob Tapert confirmed that Xena and Gabriele were together in a relationship for the production team and actresses but, due to politics, the creative team had to leave the pairing in the realm of the subtext. <https://www.looper.com/641496/the-truth-about-xena-and-gabrielles-relationship/> Accessed 13 Dec. 2022.

the encouragement that fans received from producers and even from the actors, any fan made production was a welcomed substitute for the content that could not possibly be actualized on screen. In TV Series, as well as other pieces of media, in which it is not possible to actualize a relationship on screen, fans resort to fanfics to, by transforming the original work, allowing their fantasies to take form. Even though the queer community has throughout the years been deeply involved in online production, the first fanfictions, which developed a romantic relationship between Spock and Kirk from the show *Star Trek* (1966-1969), were mostly produced by women and allowed different relationship dynamics to be explored.<sup>9</sup>

Concerning *X: WP*, the relationship between the producers and fans was so pleasant and welcoming that the TV Show itself, without any explicit queer representation (among the main characters) did more for fans than, for instance, *Ellen* did. It must also be mentioned that, while the producers knew that queer fans would read their relationship in a different manner than the heterosexual audiences, after seeing the reaction from audiences the subtext was amped up so much that the network was concerned with the intentions of the studio in making these characters lesbians (Randell-Moon, 2019, p.114). As Hanmer writes in “Xenasubtexttalk”, “Lesbian Internet fandom, as the audience ratings suggested, was now a powerful force, as fan journal *Whoosh!* recorded: the viewing figures culminated in the studio requesting a lesbian Internet fan to write for an episode of the show.” (2014, p. 610). Not only were the producers aware of the increasing lesbian audience; they even encouraged Lucy Lawless, who played Xena, to interact with the community. Despite the effort not being very pleasant, the studio frequently engaged with the community through radio and magazine interviews (Hanmer, 2014, p.611). On a final note, regarding *X: WP*, it allowed not only many fans to find themselves online through the beginnings of fan communities, but also set precedent for the extra-textual meanings that fans started producing as a response to the subtext. Simultaneously, while perfectly aware that Xena and Gabrielle would not become canon, the representation was deemed acceptable, since, even though the show did not represent lesbian relationships on screen, the subtext allowed fans to find themselves and to discover their sexual identities.

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<sup>9</sup> Much has been written on the matter of why women are so interested in male homoeroticism and while I do not intend to develop this subject, it must be mentioned that, for a long time, fans were ashamed of sharing these productions outside of the communities that had similar interests.

Moving on to another show that also set an important precedent when it comes to the representations of lesbian couples on screen, I will briefly approach *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the portrayal of an out lesbian couple. BVS, hereby referred by this acronym, is a rather interesting show as it contains a very prominent lesbian couple, as Nicole Grafanakis writes in “The Queer Influence of Buffy The Vampire Slayer” “Being one of the first TV Shows to so proudly and so positively portray a lesbian couple was monumentally impactful for gay women.” (2020, p. 2). It served to assert that lesbian couples could exist on screen, could have relationships, and could display sexual desire towards other women. In addition, and quite importantly as this topic will be approached later on, in BVS the lesbian couple composed by Willow and Tara displays a relationship in which both characters are “femme”, as opposed to the more popular dynamic of butch/femme pairings, as seen, for instance, in the Xena/Gabrielle pairing. At the same time, as Lucia Scott argues, in “They Won’t: Analyzing Queerbaiting and Compulsory Heterosexuality in Popular Television”, in lesbian representations there is a tendency to portray them as feminine, since this is appealing to the male gaze, and it does not challenge gender behavior and stereotypes (2019, p.36). Furthermore, in certain cases, a casual viewer may not even notice if a certain character is a lesbian or not, as there is nothing that could possibly identify her as such.<sup>10</sup> However, even if there are some “problematic tropes”, this show did revolutionize not only the way audiences saw lesbian couples but also the question of sexual fluidity, therefore playing a significant role in the way audiences see representations of queer characters and how they negotiate statements of sexual identity with their expectations for characters that they deem to be queer. Regarding sexual fluidity, in BVS fans accused Joss Whedon, the creator of the show, of mishandling Willow’s sexuality, since she is seen in the first seasons with men and later declares herself a lesbian, thus leading some to label it as a form of bi-erasure, and while it would have been groundbreaking to have a bisexual character on screen, her portrayal shows sexual fluidity, which on its own is already a step forward into depicting non-normative sexual identities.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Given that gender performance allows viewers to instantly read a character’s position in the narrative, when the lipstick lesbian depiction is used, mainstream audiences are not confronted with alternative gender expressions that reflect different sexualities, considering that, if not actively performed, it stays within the subliminal and is quickly forgotten. In addition, although it counts as representation, it is one that stays within the homonormative notions of queerness.

<sup>11</sup> Carson’s article shows that during the 1990s there were no on-screen representations of bisexual and/or transsexual characters.

## 1.2 Producer/audience relationships, authorial intent and queer readings

Representations of queer characters have been a concern not only to audiences but to producers and networks since, on TV, there is always a give and take relationship: “If the Internet is your audience, TV is quite like a play ... in a play, you listen to the applause, the missing laughs, the boos. It’s the same with the Internet. If you ignore that sort of response, you probably shouldn’t be working in TV right now” (Andrejevic 2008 apud McDermott, 2020, p.53). Which shows that producers are aware of what the audiences wanted to be depicted, while at the same time negotiating what can be depicted on screen, so as not to lose the interest of mainstream audiences and the money from sponsors and advertisements. This then leads to the so appealing subtext, which occurs when producers/writers tell actors to portray specific scenes in a suggestive manner without ever having the intent of actualizing this suggestiveness.<sup>12</sup> As a narrative tool, subtext is a rather important device, for it allows certain moments within the story to be set without having to explicitly depict them on screen. Filmmakers, in fact, are encouraged to “show, don’t tell” which requires a mix between narrative storytelling, subtext, *mise-en-scène* and the audience’s ability to read what is implied within a scene and more importantly in the text. *Mise-en-scène* consists of four major elements that allow directors to better stage their scenes which are: the setting, costumes and makeup, lighting and characters. At the same time, the issue arises whenever it is done in a manner that could possibly acknowledge and accommodate queer readings without ever actualizing them on-screen. The issue then being that it allowed homophobic viewers to maintain their prejudicial bias without ever needing to confront them, as Scott writes,

For queer audiences, a character’s sexuality becomes just ambiguous enough to bait such audiences into believing they will be adequately represented. For homophobic audiences, the ambiguously queer character is often used to shore up the audience’s fear of queerness. (2019, p. 2)

Although some of the shows mentioned do not necessarily play into queerbaiting practices, what should be taken from this introduction is that if networks only allowed, at

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<sup>12</sup> I use appealing as producers frequently use it, so that they appease queer audiences while maintaining the interest of straight audiences. They are therefore, very much aware of the explicit subtext that is used as a nod to queer audiences.

first, for queer content to be reduced to subtext in the 1990s, due to concerns regarding the reactions from main stream audiences, why is it that nowadays, and especially during 2010-2020, queer subtext, similar to the one seen in *X: WP*, is still so prominent in TV Shows? The debate over queerbaiting is so prominent that even newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* have articles dedicated to the term, thus proving that over the years the communities have gained enough traction when advocating for queer rights and also proving that “queerbaiting” does not exist solely in the minds of delusional fans.

### 1.3 Heteronormative discourse

In *Rizzoli & Isles* the narrative follows the typical buddy-cop shows, in which there is the very much studied “bromance”, a mix between the words ‘brother’ and ‘romance’, although it is outside the scope of this work to study the intrinsic behaviors and patterns in bromance (see Joseph Brennan, Stefan Robinson and Eric Anderson for more detailed articles and studies about male sexuality, homosociality and heteromascularity). The message that they pass to audiences is relevant and is crucial into understanding not only how queerbaiting works but also why it works and why producers and even other fans are quick to dismiss queerbaiting accusations. Moreover, as is inherently close to this dismissal, platonic relationships regarding same-sex pairings will also be explained, as this is not only the case of *Rizzoli & Isles* but of most same-sex leads on screen. These relationships are frequently claimed by producers and actors alike to be platonic, in order to avoid sexualizing them. As Scott argues, besides compulsory heterosexuality, it is difficult to grasp why some of these characters are constantly looking for a romantic partner in the opposite gender when they have a same-sex partner that completely understands, supports them and with whom they can or have already built a life. Heteronormativity, as the term suggests, is the belief that sees heterosexuality as the default sexual orientation, thus making homosexuality the abnormal, deviant sexual orientation. This is also associated with gender binarism which dictates that biological sex aligns with gender identity, roles, expression and orientation, as Ferrari et al. argue, in “Heteronormativity and the Justification of Gender Hierarchy: Investigating the Archival Data From 16 European Countries”, “[...] heteronormativity and gender binarism expect every individual to fall into either the masculine or the feminine category, which is clearly defined by the procreative physiology corresponding to his/her

chromosomal sex.” (2021, p.2). This belief is rather important, since it essentially means that humans have in them by default heterosexual expressions and desires, a notion which is frequently supported by the constant search for a partner of the opposite gender. In TV Shows like *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010) and *Boston Legal* (2004-2008), one sees how homosocial bonding takes precedence over any other possible bonding, but also how none of these characters ever experiences anything apart from heterosexual desires. Even though there is nothing wrong with homosocial bonds, it is interesting to note that rarely there is a portrayal of heterosexual bonding, between men and women, which does not culminate in a romantic relationship. In addition, it is interesting to note that whenever these bonds are represented, and this can only be analyzed case by case, the fans’ reactions tend to be mixed, with some wanting those two characters to be together whilst others vehemently deny any possible explanation as to why they should be together; an example of this is CBS’s *Elementary* (2012-2019) which contains a platonic relationship between Joan Watson and Sherlock Holmes.<sup>13</sup> Although there has been much discussion by the fans and by the media, in the end these characters remained in their platonic relationship much to the dismay of some fans and to the delight of others. Returning to queerbaiting, homosocial bonds are frequent in bromance films, which is quite common as it shuts down any possible homosexual readings. These bonds reinforce hegemonic heteronormativity, since same-sex characters have many emotional and sexually charged moments only to quickly get paired with the female romantic interest of the season.

## 1.4 Research Questions

Queerness has been, for a very long time, a part of fiction, from Jacques Collin in *Père Goriot* (1835) by Honoré de Balzac, Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf, Eric in *Another Country* (1962) by James Baldwin, to Joan Gilling in *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath, there were quite a few queer representations in literature. However, they shared the same issue as media regarding how they were presented to the public. Frequently authors were not allowed to write explicit queer characters, for fear that the book would not be published. For instance, E. M. Forster’s *Maurice* (1971) is a fine example of this as Forster even wrote, “Publishable. But worth it?” regarding the

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<sup>13</sup> It must, however, be understood that the characters are based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock series and in his works, Watson is a man, hence CBS’s decision to not portray their relationship as a romantic one. Although progressive, the show was called out by fans who read this gender reversal as a way for them to avoid the queerbaiting accusations that were already plaguing BBC’s *Sherlock*.

happy ending the queer characters had (Fulham, 2013).<sup>14</sup> Concurrently, an interesting factor in literature is that characters are compulsorily heterosexual, which is in direct line with the beliefs of heteronormativity, in which everyone is heterosexual by default, until proven otherwise. Since queerness, or more specifically, homosexuality, is the direct opposite of heterosexuality, this thesis aims to answer questions regarding how queerbaiting directly reinforces portrayals of heteronormativity and how characters that might be deemed “heterosexual” have been queer coded. Although the binarism between hetero and homo has been around since the beginning of times, recently, a new, even more challenging sexuality has been prominent in the queer spectrum, that of asexuality. This is a break with any form of sexuality, whether it be with the same or the opposite gender; it is a complete denial of a human characteristic that even hetero- and homosexuality share. Nevertheless, this form of sexuality is rarely depicted on screen, for instance, the character of Jughead is asexual, in *Archie Comics*, but not in the TV Show adaptation, *Riverdale* (2017-2023).<sup>15</sup> In the first set of questions, which are to be answered in the first part of this thesis, the object of study will be the TV Show *Rizzoli & Isles*, which was on-screen for seven seasons and aired from 2010 to 2016.

Since media and fictional characters shape the public opinion regarding the views on the queer community, the second part of this thesis aims to answer questions regarding how fans negotiate what is a “good” and a “bad” representation. These representations allow young people to connect with the characters on-screen, which in turn helps them shape their identity. This makes “bad” representations harmful, since they frequently represent queerness through stereotypical lenses, such as coming-out stories that result in death. As La Shea Walker argues, in “Women-Loving-Women Portrayals in Fiction, a Critical Literature Review”, “[b]ecause many queer young people look to queer characters in different media as role models, the ways in which these characters are portrayed affect the ways these young people view themselves.” (2019, p.3)

That said, this thesis aims to investigate how queer representations are shaped by the stereotypes depicted on-screen. The tropes of said queer couple are also going to be explored in order to showcase whether they play into stereotypical displays of queer characters or not. Furthermore, it will also be considered why, in the case of having an

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/to-a-happier-year> Accessed 14 Dec. 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Even though the TV Show was already in development before Jughead’s asexuality became canon, analysing CW’s representation it would not be realistic to expect the network to depict a character that did not experience any sexual attraction.

existing queer couple, fans insist on other characters, who are usually ambiguously heterosexual, becoming a couple. This second set of questions are going to be approached in the second part of this thesis and are related to the TV Show *Supergirl* (2015-2021), as it also contains an established queer-couple and non-queer couple from which the accusations of queerbaiting originated. As with *Rizzoli & Isles*, the show was on air for more than three seasons and was broadcasted after 2010.

## 1.5 Methodology

In order to answer the above mentioned questions, a close reading of the text will be done, as it best answers the possible queer readings contained in both TV Shows. This will be accomplished through content analysis and, moreover, an understanding of queer readings will be first explained and then applied. In addition, in the set of questions, to be answered in the first part of this thesis, the object of study will be the TV Show *Rizzoli & Isles*, which was on air for seven seasons, thus fulfilling my requirement of at least five seasons on air, which allowed screenwriters to develop the characters and give them different arcs. Furthermore, the show was on air from 2010 to 2016, thus also fulfilling the need for it to have aired from 2010s onwards. At the same time, subtext and its important place in queer readings is going to be extensively analyzed and, in addition, it will be paired with the four main elements of *mise-en-scène* (setting, costume, lightning and figure behavior), since they are an integral part of this reading, as they best showcase the visual elements that frequently escape the eye of the viewers.

## 1.6 Thesis Structure

This work will therefore focus on two major TV Series that aired during two different eras, making it possible for a better understanding of how queer representations and queerbaiting accusations have shifted throughout the 2010-2021 period. The first show analyzed will be *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010-2016) adapted to TV by Janet Tamaro and broadcasted by TNT. While this show does not contain any queer representations amongst the main characters, it contains heavy homoerotic subtext between the two female leads, Jane Rizzoli (played by Angie Harmon) and Maura Isles (played by Sasha Alexander). Plot-wise, it follows the typical buddy-cop narrative, the difference being that instead of



two men as the main characters, you have two women.<sup>16</sup> Rizzoli is the detective and is portrayed as a more stereotypically masculine woman, interested in cars and baseball, who frequently shows her displeasure to wear more feminine clothing. Maura, on the other hand, is part of the forensic team and she is rather feminine, always wears tight dresses, and seems more interested in conventional “feminine activities”. Their dynamic is therefore very similar to the often portrayed butch/femme dynamic and any casual viewer watching the show would at once, even if subconsciously, understand that Rizzoli is “the man” in the relationship.<sup>17</sup> Not just because of their obvious ways of dressing or activities but because of an interesting trope in procedural cop shows, called gender reversal, Scott writes,

[t]here is usually a “by the book” detective juxtaposed with a “loose cannon,” a character who breaks regulation when they feel it is for the greater good. The “cop and a scientist” variant still uses divergent problem-solving methods to achieve the same end; the cop is the brawn and the scientist is the brains ... (2019, p.33)

Although not all of this gender reversal applies to *Rizzoli and Isles*, it is still a common portrayal of male/female law enforcement partnerships that best helps characterize the enforced gender roles in these TV Shows, examples of pieces of media with this trope are *Bones* (2005-2017) and *Body of Proof* (2011-2013). This buddy-cop format will allow me to go deep into same-sex partnerships, while at the same time explore how their “butch/femme” interaction plays a role in queerbaiting. More importantly, however, it allows me to show how these two characters are queer coded but at the same time how the possibility of them ever being queer is frequently laughed at.

The second part will mostly focus on so called good and bad representations, based on the TV Show *Supergirl*. It was on air from 2015 to 2021 and it follows the adventures of Superman’s cousin, Kara Danvers, née Kara Zor-El. This show is a rather interesting object of study, since it will allow me to delve into stereotypical representations of queer characters. The show had five queer characters, three lesbians, one transgender woman, and a gay man and, of these five, only three are going to be studied and explored, since this section is focused on good and bad representations

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<sup>16</sup> The substitution of two women as the leads of the show instead of two men creates an interesting difference between the displays of affection between them, as well as how far the screenwriters can go when queer coding the characters.

<sup>17</sup> Subliminal messages pass without the individual’s perception; in the case of same-sex pairings, it subconsciously reinforces gender roles and performances.

between lesbian couples. In addition, a comparison between the tropes seen in *Rizzoli & Isles* and the tropes seen in the established couples of *Supergirl* are going to be analyzed, in order to better grasp how the representations of lesbian tropes have differed in the later part of 2010. At the same time, the parallelisms between the most shipped couple Kara Danvers/Lena Luthor (often referred to by its ship name Supercorp) and Alex Danvers/Maggie Sawyer (Sanvers) will be examined as they allow one to understand why fans accused the CW of queerbaiting through Supercorp. The former ship is a non-established couple between two white women who are the main characters, whereas the latter is a queer established couple composed of two lesbian women, one who is white and also a main character, Alex Danvers, and Maggie Sawyer, who is considered by the fans to be Latina (the actress who portrays Maggie is Latina) and who has sporadic appearances throughout the second and third season. The reason as to why their ethnicities and position are important is because, as already mentioned, the aim is also to understand how whiteness and centrality play a significant part into wishing for a couple to become cannon. Besides, in this part of the thesis a comparison will also be applied to Alex Danvers/Maggie Sawyer and Alex Danvers/Kelly Olsen, since fans argue about which is a good representation and which isn't. Because they both have Alex in common, this character will also be analyzed.

## 2. Key Concepts

Some of the theoretical concepts that will allow me to analyze these shows are heteronormativity, performativity, semiotics, queerbaiting and media studies which are all intertwined and allow for a broad understanding of specific terms that will be mentioned later. The two mentioned shows are both adapted works, in the case of *Rizzoli & Isles*, it is an adaptation of an ongoing book series, whereas *Supergirl* is an adaptation of superhero comic books. In works adapted to TV there is a decision to be made by networks and producers regarding what elements will be transposed to the screen and which will not. Although there is not full creative liberty, in both shows, romantic relationships, among other elements, were altered to better fit the interests of the networks, thus making them ideal to be analyzed from a heteronormative perspective.

### 2.1 Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the “default” sexuality of human beings, a belief frequently paired with gender binarism (meaning that there are only two distinct and opposite genders and that in their difference they complement each other). This idea reinforces gender roles and gender identity, which in turn leads to heterosexist discourses and to the oppression of different sexualities (Robinson, 2016, p.1). Therefore, to fully understand how heteronormativity plays such an important role, first one must understand its relation to economy, as well as how it is a core characteristic of patriarchal society. Thus, it would not be possible to explain it without mentioning gender and sexual oppression (Warner, 1991, p.7).

In 1991m Michael Warner popularized the term, in the article “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet”, which is considered a major work in queer theory and contains as its core concepts Adriene Rich’s explanation of compulsory heterosexuality and Gayle Rubin’s concept of “sex/gender system”. As mentioned, it is important to bear in mind that heterosexuality, as well as the monogamous couples are the core of society’s economy and the basic foundation of the family institution. Therefore, sexuality is deeply connected with labor and capital, which makes it so that an individual’s sexuality and sexual desire is of public interest and is heavily regulated according to society’s needs (Schroth, 2011, p.7). At the same time, it is also connected with reproduction, thus reducing heterosexual sex to a means of coupling and producing offspring;

homosexuality, therefore, represents a non-viable sexuality for society. On this point Warner writes “[p]robably most lesbians and gay men have at some point encountered the obliterative heterosexual rationale in which it is asserted that if everyone were queer, the race would die out (i.e., so don’t be queer).” (1991, p.9). In addition, considering homosexuality as the opposite of heterosexuality, individuals that are part of the queer community see themselves misrepresented in media through stereotypical depictions that are frequently harmful to queer youth. Moreover, in health care and military service they are often discriminated against and in education queer students find their sexualities erased in subjects of sexual education. Yet, as Duc Hien Nguyen found, in his study, “The Political Economy of Heteronormativity”, to overcome heteronormativity the change must not just come from accepting alternative queer identities that could replace the heterosexual family, but must first transform the gender oppression and sex-gender subject whose labor mostly pertains to expected gender roles that are deemed necessary for capitalist growth (2021, p. 16).

Gayle Rubin approached heteronormativity from the perspective of sex/gender by analyzing Levi-Strauss’ and Freud’s works on kinship systems and oedipal phases (respectively), which explain how “femininity” is gained and how female subordination is achieved. Rubin argues, in “The Traffic in Women”, “[e]ach child contains all the sexual possibilities available to human expression.” (1975, p.189). Nevertheless, as children grow, due to the fear of queerness present in the child, society quickly models them into the expected gender roles and identities, thus oppressing any possible divergent sexuality. In a way, the performance that society expects out of each individual is inherently connected to the genes that they are born with. This is an approach also known as biological determinism, which defends that the position that each gender occupies, and the roles associated to them are determined by sexual differences. In addition, when Levi-Strauss’ theories of kinship, which consist of a central system of anthropological structure that ensured the preservation of gender roles and the subordination of women, were no longer enough to guide and control individuals, society used sexuality as a way to justify the code it imposed. Levi-Strauss’ system also used homosocial bonds as a core part in establishing relationships between men, in which women served as a trading object to develop these bonds but also to oppress them and ensure their social subordination (Rubin, 1975, p.174-175). These bonds occur between members of the same gender and their importance in our society is of great prevalence, as they are the limit to which one can be close to another of the same gender without being labelled a homosexual. The

opposition of (homo)social to (homo)sexual is what regulates one as acceptable and even encouraged, and the other as repugnant and deviant.<sup>18</sup> Rubin concludes that the only way to end this oppression would be to remove the influence that the kinship system and the oedipal phase have over modern society. Moreover, she also concludes that a world in which there was no gender enforced sexuality, would tend towards bisexuality (1975, p.199).

This leads me to approach compulsory heterosexuality, which was brought to light by Adrienne Rich. Throughout her work Rich exposes that most novels focusing on heterosexuality never seem to explore lesbianism and the role it plays into female sexuality. Thus, the author explains that since society is so male focused, it is currently difficult to fully understand if women who “claim” to be heterosexual do so because they are so, or because they are preyed upon and forced into being (1980, p. 648). This “preyed upon” is rather important when it comes to notions of sexuality and heteronormativity since. As Rich puts it, “[e]arly female indoctrination in "love" as an emotion may be largely a Western concept; but a more universal ideology concerns the primacy and uncontrollability of the male sexual drive.”, (1980, p.645). In 1971, Kathleen Gough published “The Origin of Family”, which contains a list of characteristics showing the different ways in which a woman’s sexuality is controlled in previous societal structures, in which the second characteristic is “... to force it [male sexuality] upon them” (p.768). Nowadays, since this behavior is still accepted, it leads women to turn to marriage for protection, at which point they enter another institutionalized arrangement that may very well also prove to be disadvantageous to them (Rich, 1980, p.640).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Rich argues that even though lesbianism seems to be a much safer option for women, it was erased from literature to better control women and to assure that they would not think of other available sexualities. Simultaneously, lesbianism was also frequently seen as a rebellious act against patriarchy which was ridiculed or seen as a passing stage (1980, p. 649). Therefore, due to oppression, they are led to believe in heterosexuality as inherent and as the only available option, as Rich argues, “[h]eterosexuality is presumed as a ‘sexual preference’ of ‘most women’, either implicitly or explicitly” (1980, p.633).

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<sup>18</sup> In the early 2010s bromance movies were prevalent, for they allowed comedic content while at the same time exploring masculine identities and homosocial bonds between men; however, these movies rarely challenged heteronormative discourse and the “otherization” of women.

<sup>19</sup> Disadvantageous as in oppressive, to the extent that it reinforces gender conformity.

As shown, many theorists have exposed heteronormativity and the essential role it has in society, not only by making heterosexuality the default, but by “otherizing” any alternative sexualities. In turn, creating extremely difficult environments for those who decide to step outside of society’s expectations since for them education, healthcare and marital institutions are still either out of reach or are very restrictive. Thus forcing other sexualities to conform to the expected performances.<sup>20</sup> Some theorists proposed ways to overcome this discourse of a default sexuality. However, as it is deeply rooted into capitalist society the task would require more than just accepting other sexualities. The concept of gender alone and the performance and roles expected of it, would have to undergo a radical change in order for it not to be such a defining factor of an individual’s life and identity.

## 2.2 Performativity

As above mentioned, gender is a core part of sexuality and of society, therefore one must talk about gender performance and how different assumptions are made according to the gender one manifests. J. L. Austin, a language philosopher whose work, in the 1950s, revolved around speech act theory, used the term “performative utterances” when describing moments in which, when one says something, it is with the intent of doing something, for instance, when saying “I do” in a marriage ceremony (1962, p.5). Other theorists like Judith Butler used Austin’s concept to explore performativity and to explain how gender is a gained notion that is heavily connected with kinship systems and heterosexist discourses. Butler argues that a performative act is one in which speech gains an identity – this speech, when voiced, gains a power that binds it with its action (Butler, 1993, p.17). In *Gender Trouble* (2011), she analyses and develops the idea that gender is from the very beginning a performance conditioned by culture and social norms, “... gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.” (Butler, 2011, p.199). Therefore, when one says “It’s a boy” not only is a meaning being given, but the acts and expectations associated with that meaning are also being reinforced with that simple speech act. When an act is performed, due to its repetition, one is actively producing and asserting discourse, and considering

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<sup>20</sup> Gay men are expected to be the “flaming queen” (flamboyant and feminine) and lesbian women are expected to either belong to the butch or femme category, safe to say that not only this erases any other possible identity, as it also reduces individuals to the performance and the meanings associated with each label attributed to them.

that this discourse was already in place before one entered it, it becomes a conditioned performance from its inception. Consequently, to Butler gender is constructed through nonverbal communication and common speech acts which are performative and allow the definition and preservation of identities. Therefore, gender is something that one does, instead of something that one is, “[t]he effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” (Butler, 2011, p.199).

Eve Sedgwick also developed and studied the concept of performativity; however, she focused on studying it in two ways, through theatre or through speech-act theory and deconstruction (Sedgwick, 1993, p.2). Using Austin’s performative utterances that she called explicit performatives, she focused on “periperformative utterances”. These explore what surrounds the central performative utterance. The argument focused mostly on how shame is a performative and transformational which conditions the way in which individuals behave in specific settings (1993, p.5). Thus, to understand queer performativity, notions of shame and their effect are essential given that the focus of this work will venture into “good” representation which are connected with happiness, and which have been criticized for erasing the painful past of the queer community.<sup>21</sup> Sedgwick concluded that Butler’s work as well as that by other gender theorists, even though innovative, is not groundbreaking to challenge already existing notions of gender and sexuality (1993, p.15). Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, expounds on gender and social constructivism with her famous statement,

One is not born a woman, but becomes one. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine. (2011, p. 283)

This supports the idea that, at the very least, womanhood is a product of social and cultural conditioning as a way to maintain gender identities and roles, instead of a biological or natural condition that one is inherently born with. Julie Serano, however, believes that

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<sup>21</sup> This notion has been raised in recent years by queer studies in relation to the fact that audiences seem to reject tragic love stories between homosexual pairings, thus advocating for “happier endings”, which frequently supports heteronormative discourses; at the same time, as argued by some theorists, the tragic and sad love story is a part of what defines queerness and queer history, and its impact must not be forgotten.

theories such as gender essentialism and gender performativity are incomplete.<sup>22</sup> She proposes the Intrinsic Inclination model, in which one is intrinsically inclined to some of the kinds of behaviors that make up a specific gender, which could help explain individuals that display gender expressions from a young age before social conditioning has had a significant impact (Berlatsky, 2013).<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, Beauvoir, Butler and Sedgwick all emphasized that gender is as much an object as it is a subject, an object that is shaped and performed by individuals in correspondence to what is expected by society. This performance is heavily conditioned by meanings that are attributed to each gender, such as men being strong and therefore providing for the family and women being nurturing to raise and take care of the children. All these are seen as being natural and intrinsic of each gender, but they are reproduced to control society and maintain the hegemonic power.

Having mentioned some core theorists and their assertions on the matters of performativity, and also considering that this raises the problematic of specific performances leading to fixed assumptions, it is important to bear in mind how much meaning plays an important part in the performance that society expects of each gender. These assumptions assert the expected discourse as normal and natural, while, at the same time, depicting those whose performance falls outside of the expected, as abnormal and unnatural. It is then understandable that individuals try to either conform to the expectation and inherent meanings, in order to avoid being cast aside. As Callen Zimmerman argues, in “Getting Located: Queer Semiotics in Dress”, “[i]n a culture so reliant on visual representation of power dynamics, image causes and creates recognition. Image of oneself as a part of a group is and has historically been important for minority groups.” (2019, p.13). Images of white feminine gay men, for instance, do not pose the same challenge to hegemonic discourse as black masculine gay men, since anything associated with femininity is seen as weaker. Simultaneously, queer couples in which one is very feminine and the other is very masculine still reinforce ideas of attraction to gender expressions that are opposite.

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<sup>22</sup> Gender essentialism explains gender through biology, i.e. sex chromosomes.

<sup>23</sup> Serano also references the case of transgender individuals who can be acutely aware that their subconscious sex does not match their physical body thus denying the identity that they were assigned on the basis of that body. See <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/09/gender-as-non-fiction/279962/> for more information on gender essentialism.



## 2.3 Semiotics (Queer Readings)

Having mentioned performance and the assumptions linked to one's gender, the focus will now turn to how this performance is given meaning and what is interpreted from those meanings. To explain this, I will briefly mention the systematic study of signs and of meaning making, also called Semiology. It was first introduced in *General Linguistics* (1916) by Ferdinand de Saussure which focused on a general science of signs; later, Roland Barthes published *Éléments de sémiologie* (1964) in which he expanded on Saussure's work and argued that Semiology is a part of Linguistics (1964, p.11). Barthes then groups Semiology under four main concepts, Language and Speech; Signified and Signifier; Syntagma and System, and Denotation and Connotation. For the brevity of this chapter, I will focus on the last major concept which allows me to better analyze visual objects and the meanings of their signs. Denotation focuses on the literal meaning of a specific word, frequently the one found in the dictionary while connotation focuses on the emotions relating to a specific meaning, it is what allows one to extract and make sense of texts, works of art and music. Thus, there is a connection between the definition of the world "table", for instance, and the sense extracted by the receiver in order to make sense of what the word means, accordingly, Semiotics studies the correlation between how the meanings are created and how they are attributed to specific symbols.

However, when referring to non-verbal signs, such as gestures and behaviors in which there is not an explicit verbal message, but whose message is perceived by the receptors because of the inherent meaning that they are associated with, there must be, between the sender and the receiver, in order to successfully establish communication, a "web of significance" which allows for a cohesive comprehension of the world.<sup>24</sup> Yet, in this significance, the connotated meanings are produced and negotiated by a society in which those in power are heterosexual white males. Beauvoir argues that the ones with the dominating power belittle the "Other" to develop and affirm the "Self". Although she was referring to Men as the ones in power and Women as the belittled ones, the same example could be applied to heterosexuality vs homosexuality. Which leads me to expose on the ways in which homosexual behavior is frequently associated with "gender inversion", how this reinforces oppression, stereotypical representations and how the term "homosexual" gained its specific meanings and how these meanings are read by society.

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<sup>24</sup> This of course means that sender and receiver of said message must have similar ways of decoding the non-verbal cues to reach a similar meaning.

Since media, as mentioned, shapes the public's opinion, it is no wonder that when the "Sissy" appeared during the 1930s (in Cinema) its images became forever associated with the homosexual man. In this portrayal, the homosexual man was effeminate, used flashy colors, make-up and a specific hairstyle. They were seen as occupying the space between men and women and had a neutralized sexuality, as Russo argues, "[h]omosexuality in the movies, whether overtly sexual or not, has always been seen in terms of what is or is not masculine." (1981, p.10). Seeing that this representation supports the idea of the homosexual man as having feminine qualities due to their attraction to the same gender, it indirectly reinforces heteronormativity and nowadays the connection between male homosexuality and femininity is still prevalent in society. This, in turn makes it so that in the web of significance, the meanings associated with flamboyant individuals became connected with homosexuality. Albeit nowadays there is a variety of different symbols associated with homosexuality, for instance, masculine bulky, hairy men, commonly referred by the gay community as "bears", there is still pressure to fit into these "feminine" expectations. Additionally, it would be preferred of gay men to be masculine since the flamboyant individual, whether part of the queer community or not, would still be, due to the symbols that are associated with flamboyancy, in greater danger than a masculine passing gay man. Therefore, while nowadays there are different expectations, they are still rather specific and there is a pressure into performing what is expected of those roles to fit in. In addition, the meanings associated with homosexual men are that, as mentioned, they exhibit feminine qualities, thus making them inferior; heterosexual men, in turn, perform in correspondence to the meanings associated with masculinity, such as being strong, independent, and leaders (Russo, 1981, p.11).

Regarding the symbols of lesbianism, for a long time the best way to identify a lesbian woman would be through the clothing she would wear, most specifically pants. This item of clothing, produced for men, led to the arrest of many women in the early 1900s; however, as more and more women joined the army and wore practical clothing items, the more they became socially acceptable. Moreover, short, shaved hair also became associated with lesbianism, especially with the butch lesbian, which was frequently depicted in media as aggressive and predatory towards the subject of her desires. Thus again reinforcing "gender inversion" in homosexuality (Russo, 1981, p.130). Whereas the gay man is identified through his feminine qualities, the lesbian is identified through her "masculine appearance and behavior". In media they are often

portrayed by having more masculine jobs, such as law enforcement and construction and they usually do not have any interest in stereotypically defined “female activities”, such as shopping and skin care routines. In recent years, as lesbianism became more accepted, TV portrayals try to cater to the male gaze, thus portraying lesbians in a feminine manner as opposed to the butch of earlier years. Besides this, a rather important meaning associated with the queer community has to do with the use of specific objects and with their placement within the body. Ear piercings and handkerchiefs are traditionally used to visually and quickly reproduce a very specific meaning relating to its user, for instance, an earring worn on the right ear means its user is gay, whereas a grey handkerchief worn on the left back pocket of jeans means that its user is a bondage top.

As these examples have shown, specific behaviors and gestures, which initially had no queer connection, are nowadays an indicator of one’s sexuality. Similar to the way in which pink is often associated with femininity, the make-sense behind, for instance, the expression “limp wrist” has become associated with homosexuality amongst men, even though the gesture originally was only associated with femininity. Going back to semiology, the denotation of “limp-wristed” would be “used to describe a man who does not behave in the strong and determined way traditionally expected in men” and the connotation would be a man who presents and behaves in an effeminate manner.<sup>25</sup> In turn, this makes it so that individuals who are flamboyant, without any relation to their sexuality, or women who are more masculine presenting are read or assumed to be gay/lesbian, due to the meanings associated with these behaviors. This could lead those that read these behaviors to feel cheated when realizing that to these individuals their behavior is not related to their sexuality.<sup>26</sup>

## 2.4 Queerbaiting

Queerbaiting as a term has seen drastic changes throughout the years. These changes have also altered the public perception on what counts as queerness and what can be considered as queerbaiting. Since the term is associated with media studies and more specifically with audiences’ perceptions of a specific text, it is important to introduce the

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<sup>25</sup> Taken from the *Cambridge Online Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/limp-wristed> Accessed 10 Jan. 2023.

<sup>26</sup> This is connected with real-life queerbaiting, most specifically connected with celebrities, in which one behaves in a certain manner to try to cater to queer audiences. Harry Styles is a British singer who has been criticized by fans for displaying “queer behavior”, such as wearing women’s clothing and using makeup, while at the same time being ambiguous about his sexuality.

definition found on Urban Dictionary. This internet-based dictionary, regulated by its users, allows anyone to contribute with definitions which are then given a thumbs up or a thumbs down. The definition of queerbaiting with the most thumbs up goes as follows:

1. A marketing technique used to attract queer viewers that involves creating romantic or sexual tension between two same-sex characters but never making it canon or evolving on it
2. when straight men or women pretend to be gay and flirt with people of the same sex as a joke (Urban Dictionary)<sup>27</sup>

As the first definition shows, the term, although slightly different, is on par with similar explanations from theorists, such as Joseph Brenan and Emma Nordin, which means that audiences have similar thoughts on what comprises queerbaiting, yet, as will be shown ahead, not only is this term difficult to define, as it also raises questions such as: What is queerness? What counts as baiting? What are audiences advocating for, when accusing a show of queerbaiting?

To begin with, as explained in the introduction, the term shifted before it came to be associated with the definition the theorists and online communities now use, which frequently is Fathallah's definition:

Queerbaiting may be defined as a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility. (2015, p.2)

However, it seems that even the definition does not define what exactly can be ruled as queerbaiting and what cannot.<sup>28</sup> This leads some audience members to accuse a TV Show of queerbaiting, while others fail to see that could possibly lead to such accusations. Therefore, defining what counts as queerness, and how certain aspects of queerness on screen can be seen as baiting, whereas others seem to be perfectly acceptable, is rather important, since it allows one to explain why there seems to be so much discussion on what is queerbaiting and what is not. McDermott tried, in his work, to define what counted as queerness to the viewers; he concluded that queerness meant same-sex attraction and relationships between two same gender characters. Besides this, there is also a discussion

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=queerbaiting> Accessed 6 Jan. 2023.

<sup>28</sup> The reason as to why it can't be is because too many factors play into queerbaiting, such as authorial intent, audiences' expectations, and even network restrictions.

on the usage of the term “queer” and whether it counted as a slur or as a celebration of the LGBTQ+ community (2020, p.64).<sup>29</sup> A consensus within the theorists is that the name created a sense of belonging and community (specially online on Tumblr and on Twitter) that allowed its users to connect with one another, “the term queer is not just to avoid excluding people from the LGBTQIA+ community, but to make herself feel included amongst her peers, to feel a sense of belonging despite their seemingly different genders or sexualities” (McDermott, 2020, p. 65). This then means that the need to find this community represented in media makes it so that they frequently advocate for diversity and authenticity; however, the constant advocating for representations of the “other” reinforces even more the otherization of oppressed groups. Had, for instance, *Supernatural* (2005-2020) explicitly allowed Dean and Castiel to become a couple, the show, instead of being known for the premise of two brothers fighting supernatural creatures, would have been categorized as the show with the gay human/angel couple. Furthermore, even though fans advocate for sexual identities that belong to the queer community and publicly demand an increase in different representations, they are at the same time very strict and stiff in what they consider as actual queer portrayals, consequently, not actually advocating for any visible diversity. In other words, using “queerness” as a way to comprise all the possible identities of the LGBTQ+ community, whilst at same time upholding standards of authentic representation does very little to allow the acceptance of diversity (McDermott, 2020, p.66).

This brings me to a topic raised by critics when discussing the indignation raised by fans on the matters of queerbaiting. Putting aside moments similar to the one seen in *THE 100*, very rarely are there portrayals in which the characters are sexually fluid.<sup>30</sup> Many factors contribute for this to happen and until the early 2010s very rarely were there any portrayals of bisexuals, one of the reasons being that bisexuality is frequently associated with indecisiveness and promiscuity, which leads to prejudice from queers and heterosexuals alike (Cook, 2018, p.13-14).<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the lack of bisexuals allows the binarism of heterosexual vs homosexual to continue, while also ignoring all the other existing queer identities. The ability to possibly be with any gender has always

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<sup>29</sup> These conclusions came from a series of interviews that allowed McDermott to best expose the audience’s thoughts and experiences regarding the issue of queerbaiting.

<sup>30</sup> Regarding this TV Show, controversy arose when, after two of the female leads got together, fans complained they were given false hopes regarding the future of the couple in the next season, in order to maintain interest only for one of the leads to die halfway into the next season.

<sup>31</sup> There were a few moments in which characters could be read as bisexual, however, by the end of the TV Show the character would eventually find their identity as a gay man or lesbian woman.

generated great discussion with the queer community and this issue is even clearer on TV, but at the same time because producers find resistance from queer audiences and the heterosexual audiences in accepting bisexual characters, let alone sexual fluidity, and therefore portraying them proves to be an even bigger challenge. Concurrently, it is much safer for producers to maintain the sexualities of characters as ambiguous as possible with sufficient instances that allow a casual viewer to think that the sexualities of all the characters are by default heterosexual, unless otherwise explicitly stated. Occasionally, the characters are mistaken for being queer for a humorous effect, which, as analyzed by Scott, is only funny because while the expectation of these characters ever belonging to the queer community is created, in the end that expectation is depicted as ridiculous (2020, p. 41-42).

Queerbaiting is, therefore, an ever-shifting term that at first was used whenever queer audiences were exploited for marketing and financial reasons. Nowadays, the term is also used whenever stereotypical representations reveal to be prejudicial to the queer community. Consequently, it leads fans to argue on what counts as queer representation but also on what couples should be used as an example of queerbaiting and which ones shouldn't be considered.<sup>32</sup> In recent years, Joseph Brennan, due to the politics associated with queerbaiting, has argued that instead of using this term, it would be best to revive "HoYay", as it recalls a time in which fans celebrated homo-erotic subtext and there was not a talk of exploiting the queer community through subtext (2016, p.14). Nonetheless, as Robin Joffe argues, the reason as to why this term could not currently substitute queerbaiting is because, in the past producers were not allowed to depict queer content leading audiences to celebrate any possible queer subtext. Nowadays, as the queer community has gained more traction, it is expected for the representations to be updated on screen without constantly hiding behind subtext and to represent different queer identities, instead of inserting a queer character to fill out quotas and then depicting them in the most stereotypical manner (2020, p. 28-29).

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<sup>32</sup> McDermott also notes that whenever fans mention their desire for happy endings it is frequently connected to heteronormative discourses, thus not actually challenging hegemonic discourse, and, as will be explained later, it is deeply connected with different definitions of happiness.

### 3. Media Studies

Queerbaiting relates to media studies due to the queer representations depicted in the various forms of media devices. Thus, an understanding on how fans expect queer characters to be a part of the narrative without being confined to the eternal closet and to stereotypes is rather important, as it explains how the relationships between producers and audiences have shifted and how power/powerless relationships started to develop. In addition, an understanding of the different institutions that regulate TV and Cinema will be expanded on, as they are an essential part in understanding how the different regulations shaped audience expectations. To start with, it is fundamental to bear in mind that media studies are a recent object of study in academia. Even though in Canada by the 1950s universities were establishing Journalism as well as Radio and TV Studies, the effects that these had on audiences and on society were only studied later. Therefore, due to how recent the internet is, as the latest medium, the relationship between all the different media devices and the effect it has on audiences is still being studied.

There are a variety of methods one can use to do media research. Ranging from content analysis to focus groups, these methods require a piece of media to be analyzed. However, it seems that over the years, media studies controversies have arisen that dispute results of media theories and studies, such as debates over the Spiral of Silence Theory, which defends that “[t]hose who hold a minority opinion silence themselves to prevent social isolation” (*Understanding*, 2016, p.70), a theory that mostly applies to those afraid of public opinion and fails to take into consideration the fluidity of an individual’s opinion.<sup>33</sup> Besides this, there are concerns over the influence that politics has on media studies, since results produced by studies whether biased or not influence its readers. To best understand how these theories have developed, one must first look at the different media devices throughout the years and to the simultaneously queer depictions that have produced.

Media studies are a field of study primarily dedicated to the content of various pieces of media mostly focused on mass media. This field draws on from other academic areas such as the humanities, social sciences and mass communication. As a part of human social relations since the beginning of times, it is fundamental to remember that for a long-time queerness was depicted as nonexistent, or, if it existed, it was tragic and

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<sup>33</sup> As per the author’s wishes to remain unnamed, the title of the work being quoted will henceforth replace the author’s name.

solitary. Therefore, queer politics tried to establish in the media that they existed and were enjoying life, through slogans such as “We’re here. We’re Queer. Get used to it!” and “Silence=Death/Action=Life”, which were popular during the late 80s early 90s, while the AIDS pandemic left its devastating effects on the gay community. Thus, if they wanted to have any chance at claiming the same rights that heterosexuals have, then showing society that they existed was the first step to be taken, as Travers Scott argues, in “Queer Media Studies in the Age of the E-invisibility”, “a fundamental strategy of modern queer politics has been visibility” (2011, p.96). However, although important for newer generations to see that they are not alone, visibility movements and projects have also been met with criticism considering they sell narratives of finding your identity and community, which are not universal to every queer individual and may lead some to enter the delusion world of progressiveness and acceptance that may not be readily available to each member (Matos and Wargo, 2019, p.7). Therefore, I will now make a brief chronological overview over different pieces of media, while simultaneously present how queerness was inserted into them to better demonstrate how specific narratives were divulged.

At first, the only way to pass on information was through orality, later with the alphabet, written pieces became the most popular form of media circulation. However, it was not until Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in 1451, that written pieces of media such as books could be properly produced, allowing the dissemination of cultural movements such as the Protestant Reformation (*Understanding*, 2016, p.11). Later in 1814, Koenig’s upgrade of the printing machine allowed the industrialization of mass printed media to develop, thus allowing newspapers to become common, cheaper, and faster to produce. This, for instance, allowed Americans in unfamiliar territory to receive news of the world and allowed readers to forge a sense of national identity and community. Moreover, this device could disseminate big pieces of information to a quite wide and heterogenous audience at a swift pace (*Understanding*, 2016, p.11). This upgrade allowed queer media to develop through magazines, and the first queer magazine was created in Germany under the name, *Der Eigene* (1896) it was not sold on newspapers stands thus had to be bought through “underground merchants”. In the Anglophone world the first established magazine was *One* (1952) published by Mattachine Society, and it focused mostly on public education of queer matters through articles written by doctors and psychologists. In 1956, *The Ladder*, belonging to the Daughters of Bilitis, was the US first widely distributed lesbian publication. In the 1960s, the Stonewall riots called



for a more modern approach in queer magazines and, in 1967, the *Los-Angeles Advocate* was first published and today it is still going, now under the name *The Advocate*. During the 90s AIDS crisis, pamphlets circulated in which “straight people” were viewed as the enemy, which created a bigger division and led to more antagonistic behavior from both parts, also reinforcing the idea of the hetero vs homo binarism (Macharia, 2020, p.40). These magazines were inconspicuous and allowed the participation of the readers in an era before the Internet and in which queer representation on TV was still scarce or too censored. It also allowed the community to bond over the stories and symbols pertaining to queerness.

At the same time, as Rob Cover argues, in “Re-Sourcing Queer Subjectivities: Sexual Identity and Lesbian/Gay Print Media”, within the narratives of queer media besides the coming out moment in which one fully finds sexual freedom and enlightenment, the tragic and unhappy childhood is also incredibly popular (2002, p.113). As Elspeth Probyn had previously argued, “[n]owadays, it seems hard to find anyone who actually had a normal, happy childhood. [...] Unhappy childhood memories, moreover, seem to be infectious, one person’s story spurring another’s.” (1995, p.443). Connecting this idea to recognition and performativity, Cover writes that queer media in the 1970s - 1990s worked mostly through magazines which legitimated queerness and allowed the creation and establishment of a queer community and of symbolic codes. However, he argues that by wanting the discourse to be validated some performed it into creation. In other words, it seems that when individuals find their community but cannot find identification with the narrative, they rewrite their identity in a way that allows for a possible identification (Cover, 2002, p.117). In turn, this creates narratives that get perpetuated as the essential experience to be a part of the community. Together with this narrative comes the idea that rural towns represent bigotry and primitive ideas, as opposed to metropolitan cities which are open minded and progressive.

Later, in 1847, the telegraph created the possibility of sending quick and short messages. This revolutionized how commerce was handled, how wars were fought and overall allowed for news stations to quickly exchange pieces of information. Eventually in the 1920s, radio was developed for major audiences and even schools and cities applied for a license to broadcast, since it was practical and easy to connect with others. Simultaneously, the post-war extravagant consumerist society greatly enjoyed this device, because listeners had to tune in at specific times to hear their wanted programs, thus creating a sense of community among them.

At the same time, Hollywood was also taking its first steps with advances made by inventors in photography to create moving pictures. Because of the wide reach Cinema had, alarm was raised over what could be broadcasted – issues such as propaganda, immorality, and interracial relationships were among the themes that should not be broadcasted.

Until the 1910s there was not censorship in Cinema, however, some states created different censorship rules leading to a variety of different versions of the same film. The reasons included regulation of non-gender conformist behavior, violence, and lewd content, among others. Due to the destruction and misery left by the First World War, the need to celebrate life became more extravagant, leading to outright depictions of sex and hedonism. At this time, the sissy appeared and became a sexless in-between masculinity/femininity character, a representation that came to be forever associated with the gay man. This hedonistic era was very decadent and liberal in film, quickly paving the way towards a censorship system. In 1929, the Hays Code was created under the creed that movies exist to have a positive moral influence. Due to this censorship system, directors and writers had to find other ways to depict the sensitive themes. Whereas lesbianism could sometimes be allowed if the characters were depicted as criminal or evil, homosexuality among men, however, was mostly only allowed if done subtly, “[y]ou got very good at projecting subtext ... without saying a word about it.” (Al-Gore, Screenwriter).<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, *Ben-Hur* (1959) was filled with homosexual subtext amongst the main characters because the studio would not be allowed to release the movie with a blatant gay relationship between the male leads; nevertheless, the 2016 remake of *Ben-Hur* did not allow the original subtext to be realized on screen (Child, 2016).<sup>35</sup>

By the 1960s the courts had allowed studios to censor their films and the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA), with Jack Valenti as its president, became the organization to regulate film broadcasting ratings (*Understanding*, 2016, p.348). In the 1980s movies like *Longtime Companion* (1989), rated R, and *Philadelphia* (1993), rated PG-13, had explicit queer depictions, mostly connected with the AIDS crisis. However, whereas these movies had tragic endings, these representations were not as censored as in previous years, nonetheless, very rarely would there be scenes with sexual themes between men. Female nudity and intimacy, on the other hand, would occasionally occur,

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<sup>34</sup> “The Celluloid Closet.” YouTube, twotoo2tw, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/aug/17/ben-hur-remake-gore-vidal-charles-heston-gay> for more information on *Ben-Hur* (2016) Accessed 28 Feb. 2023.

since they were not seen as threats to the audiences, nor were they seen as challenging hegemonic discourse; besides, they also played into the male-gaze as sex scenes among women. Regarding queerness in Cinema, Vito Russo published *The Celluloid Closet* (1980), a rather detailed book compiling the different portrayals of queerness from the sissy to the dead, evil lesbian in Cinema. Although praised for its details, it is criticised, since it fails to clarify that queerness in film, produced throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rarely allowed queer people to depict themselves, making those films a misrepresentation of real queer lives (Fleming, 1983).

After the Second World War a new form of mass media communication was introduced and it quickly became prolific, television sets. A media device that quickly entered the house of Americans and became the most popular piece of media, it had moving pictures, sound, and provided a great source of entertainment, “by 1946 there were around 17000 televisions in the USA, within 7 years two thirds of American households owned at least one set.” (*Understanding*, 2016, p.12). The broadcast system was mostly owned by 3 major companies which had some critics complain that “television was fostering a homogenous conformist culture by reinforcing ideas about what ‘normal’ American life looked like.” (*Understanding*, 2016, p.13). At the same time, live coverage of violent acts and movements led audiences to be influenced in ways that radio and newspaper couldn’t do, as argued in *Understanding*,

[p]roviding viewers with footage of the most intense human experiences, televised news have been able to reach people in a way that radio and newspapers cannot. The images themselves have played an important role in influencing viewer opinion. (2016, p.392)<sup>36</sup>

Originally, no queer content was allowed on TV, thus, queer individuals had difficulty finding any representation on-screen; even when there was, the representations were either rather neutralized, or were amongst the most promiscuous characters of TV

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<sup>36</sup> Concurrently, because tv is much more of a one-way communication than the newspaper, which does not allow for much input from viewers, it is critical to bear in mind that content producers intend to send a message that could be lost on viewers, or it could be interpreted in different manners. Similarly, newspapers also contain various messages that are available to a heterogeneous audience with varied cultural backgrounds and different levels of education, however, the reach of newspaper, at the time, was smaller than that of television and, at least in some newspaper pieces, it was not possible to know the author’s identity, the newspaper had an editor and the piece had to be approved before publication, in order not to conflict with the views of the target audience and of the newspaper company.

Shows.<sup>37</sup> However, due to audience complaints, regarding queer content that alluded to scenes of sexual nature, networks (such as NBC and CBS, among others) would maintain the scenes as tame as possible, in order to appease most viewers (McDermott, 2020, p.51). In the 1980s and 1990s, with the introduction of cable, it became possible to watch 24/7 programs, ranging from golf to classical music, which led the interest in the four biggest networks to dwindle. Furthermore, cable did not have to comply with broadcasting rules and censorship, for instance, allowing depictions of queer couples, adult content, and graphically violent scenes (*Understanding*, 2016, p.404). This led queer content to be mostly available on cable networks, such as HBO and Showtime (Netzley, 2010, p.970). By the mid 2010s, queer characters were frequent on TV, nevertheless, by then the complaints came from the way in which they were represented and how they differed from their heterosexual counterparts and from other identities within the sexual spectrum (Cook, 2018, p.22-37).

Considering that TV is one of the most popular media devices, on-screen representations directly affect how society sees queerness. As cultivation theory defends, "... heavy exposure to media causes individuals to develop an illusory perception of reality based on the most repetitive and consistent messages of a particular medium." (*Understanding*, 2016, p.71). Even though this theory has been questioned by critics due to its broad claims, on-screen representations of queerness have led to more acceptance and diversity, as Jack Harris argues, "[r]esearch has confirmed the connection between seeing gay characters and acceptance of gay people in real life, pointing to the power of queer representation to dissolve heteronormativity and, as a result, reduce homophobia." (2017, p.5).

Queer media is thus cautious with the narratives depicted on-screen, as they do not always correspond to the truth and may be misleading (Matos and Wargo, 2019, p.9). Moreover, they present queer stories as rather tragic and sad, which sends the idea of these stereotypes and identities being the only narratives that queer individuals experience, so these representations are argued to be harmful for queer youths (McDermott, 2020, p.87). In June 2022, Taika Waititi stated in an interview pertaining to the show *Our Flag Means Death* (2022-), by HBO – which contains queer representation – that in a large amount of queer shows there is a long monologue about

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<sup>37</sup> This drastic difference in representations had to do with the intentions of the network: neutral queer characters were seen as asexual, posing no threat to heterosexual audiences. Hypersexual queer characters, however, were read as promiscuous, depraved predators.

labelling oneself and discovering a new sexual identity.<sup>38</sup> This TV Show, in which Waititi is an executive producer and an actor, depicts sexual fluidity and queer diversity instead of the stereotypical coming out and identifying as a part of a community story, “[w]e’ve created a world where to be gay or bi is just completely accepted and that’s just the way it is. Doesn’t matter if someone’s a villain or a good guy and you know it’s [the sexuality] just sort of brushed off.”<sup>39</sup> (Waititi, 2022). Even though these statements are uplifting, TV is still far from depicting asexuality, polyamorous relationships and aromantic sexualities.<sup>40</sup> This leads me to speak of a frequently debated matter regarding the assimilation of queerness onto mainstream media, by forcing heteronormative values such as the monogamous married couple with children. *Modern Family* (2009-2020) broadcasted by ABC, is a good example of how queer couples are tailored to best fit the interests of the network, while not alienating heterosexual audiences. In this TV Show the gay couple starts the first episode by adopting a baby from Vietnam and later gets married in a simple wedding. As Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan argue, “... these limited representations [of LGBT people and families] reify neoliberal ideas about sexuality’s relationship to race and class, and encourage gay assimilation into normative but problematic, nonequitable institutions.” (2016, p.2). Some argue that the portrayal of happy, established, well-off couples is, on its own, an already progressive step compared to the tragic endings that queer characters often meet. Others, however, complain that forcing these queer characters or couples to conform to a hegemonic and heteronormative structure leads too very little progress and defiance, and is still a restrictive representation of what queerness includes (Harris, 2017, p.12).<sup>41</sup>

Getting back to the evolution of media and how they relate to queer histories, by 1970, RAM (Random Access Memory) was invented, which allowed a variety of digital content to be contained in one chip, all communication devices reduced to a single microprocessor, making it rather hard to separate them. This process is called media convergence and it allows various forms of media devices, such as a tv and a photographic

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<sup>38</sup> “Taika Waititi (‘Our Flag Means Death’): ‘Maybe the whole thing was a practical joke on me.’” Youtube, GoldDerby / Gold Derby, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> “Taika Waititi (‘Our Flag Means Death’): ‘Maybe the whole thing was a practical joke on me.’” Youtube, GoldDerby / Gold Derby, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Moreover, it is key to remember that many of the TV Shows that do have these representations (nowadays they are not non-existent on screen) are either from cable or from pay-per-view streaming websites, as major broadcasting channels still shy away from these depictions.

<sup>41</sup> The debate nowadays could be whether these white, gay, married couples with children still represent a depiction of queerness or have become so assimilated that they no longer represent what it signifies to be queer.

camera to be converted into just one small portable device (*Understanding*, 2016, p.19). This progress eventually led us to the current era, in which one can be on a videocall, while checking their e-mail, or watching a video and at the same time connecting with other viewers through hashtags. E-mails, particularly, were revolutionary by permanently changing the way in which people communicated. Even today, around 50 years after the first network email was sent, it is still one of the most used forms of communication among internet users. The first browser was the Worldwide Web, created in 1990 and later, Mosaic, developed by Marc Andreessen, which became the most popular browser as it allowed users to bookmark pages and to view images. Nowadays, even though there is a wide variety of browsers, the internet offers an even bigger variety of opportunities and possibilities, among them social media networks, which are among the services with the highest number of users. However, because they are free, users are likely to have several different social media accounts and to quickly swap in between them as new features are developed.<sup>42</sup> Due to the easy access of social media, concerns have been raised over the spread of fake news and lack of credible sources, as young audiences particularly are not able to distinguish between what bears credible arguments and sources from news on blogs that share no source (*Understanding*, 2016, p.488).<sup>43</sup>

As a very broad and diverse media device, the internet has a place for individuals that fall outside of the homonormative bounds, allowing them to not only connect with those that are not represented in mainstream queer media, but to also create and distribute their own digital spaces (Robertson, 2018, p.96). In the first years, it was also a place in which one could recreate or cosplay an identity that was not restricted by social norms, so online role-playing communities allowed many individuals to better understand their identities and to connect with peers (Alexander, 2002, p.79). Moreover, as Fox and Ralston show, while social acceptance has been growing, queer individuals still experience phases of confusion regarding their identity and sexuality (2016). Thus, to find answers means to turn to the internet, from blogs to games, where individuals can easily connect and access pieces of media that best allow them to, if not find the answers,

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<sup>42</sup> These services also have specific target audiences; for instance, Reddit mostly targets young adults <https://www.oberlo.com/blog/reddit-statistics>, LinkedIn targets business professionals, mostly users aged 25-34, <https://datareportal.com/essential-linkedin-stats>, whereas TikTok targets mostly users aged between 18-24, <https://datareportal.com/essential-tiktok-stats>.

<sup>43</sup> On an interesting note, the Chinese version of TikTok, called Douyin (抖音), was reported to promote educational content to the younger generations, whereas in the worldwide version the content is mostly related to dances and lip-sync videos. See <https://gab-china.com/what-are-the-main-differences-between-douyin-vs-tiktok/> for more information on the differences between the two versions. Accessed 23 Feb. 2023.

to at least realize that they are not alone. The study shows that most individuals use it to easily connect and to find answers to questions relating to identity in the LGBTQIA+ spectrum and the transition to that identity (Fox and Ralston, 2016, p.4). Using blogs, forums, and social media networks to connect with others allowed participants of the study to realize that their experiences were common and that a name could be attributed to define them, “[o]nline role models were most essential for individuals with identities that are rarely portrayed or invisible in regular media, such as asexuals or individuals going through gender transitions.” (Fox and Ralston, 2016, p.7). Furthermore, a key feature of internet is the possibility to remain anonymous and simultaneously finding others going through similar experiences. Even so, specific social network services are preferred, such as Tumblr or Reddit, that are more focused on sharing thoughts, as opposed to the very popular Facebook that focuses more on connecting online with those around you (Fox and Ralston, 2016, p.5). The internet has allowed those that feel marginalized in their daily life to connect with peers and more importantly to find information online that allows them to find community in a safe, comfortable, and anonymous place that validates their identities.

In recent years, media has had a rather positive turn in the effect it has created and in the awareness that it generates, from specific months or weeks dedicated to queer sexualities, to popular mainstream artists waving pride flags. This turn has been so significant that celebrities nowadays openly show support for queer rights without fear of being rejected by audiences and fans or of losing possible sponsorship deals. Concurrently, this support has, however, raised the issue of celebrity queerbaiting which occurs whenever celebrities ambiguously allude to queer content to gain the support of the queer community. Albeit some have criticized celebrities for doing this, others defended them by saying that a celebrity’s sexuality is not of any interest to the fans (Harris, 2023).<sup>44</sup> Still, whether they are queer or not, their celebrity persona has a great cultural influence on the symbolic codes of queerness, therefore, how this persona is depicted and associated with queerness is of great interest to the queer community.

Ultimately, queerbaiting is difficult to define since it has come to mean all possible identities that are not straight, making it a highly diverse umbrella term. It turns queer media studies into a very broad area that can encompass queer magazines as the one seen in the 1970s, to celebrity queerbaiting and its relationship with the audiences

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<sup>44</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/06/t-magazine/queer-baiting-harry-styles-bad-bunny.html>) Accessed 27 Feb. 2023.

and with the queer community. In addition, it must also be understood that audiences, with different cultural backgrounds, will read and interpret messages in a variety of manners, making it so that whereas certain behavior and activity may be read as queer to some, to others, that message may be unreasonable and unfounded. Queer media is thus an ongoing process that constantly re-evaluates what is queerness, how it is assimilated into mainstream media and how this affects the relation between queerness as a representation of the “other” and queerness as a representation of the LGBTQIA+ community. Consequently, there is still a long way to go into fully understanding how these different media devices play a role into shaping the relationships between queers and non queers, whilst also allowing the queer community to find peers that share similar experiences and symbolic codes.



## 4. *Rizzoli & Isles* Analysis

### 4.1 Compulsory Heterosexuality

Having discussed media and the impact it has on audiences' understanding of different themes in society, it is fundamental to understand how media studies approach the relationship between the content and the perceived notions that the audience acquires. It is therefore important to first understand the target audience and then the agenda behind the production of TV Series. In the specific case of *Rizzoli & Isles* (2011-2016), developed by Janet Tamaro and broadcasted by TNT, the main premise revolves around two female leads that use their quick wit and skill to read the evidence and solve the crime of the week. In the entertainment business, procedural law enforcement TV Shows are the most popular (Koblin, 2023).<sup>45</sup> Besides providing audiences with a sense of getting justice done and of trust in the American law enforcement institutions, they frequently do not require much of a critical eye and allow irregular watching schedules. In this format the most important episodes usually appear in the first and last episode of the season.<sup>46</sup> Thus, in these TV Series the audience knows that their favorite teams of cops or analysts will solve the external conflict until the end of the episode – with the exception of episodes divided into two or more parts – consequently following a fairly simple line and setting, which does not require much attention to every single scene.

Besides the above-mentioned aspects, it is the frequent intense homoerotic relationship between the leads, usually men, which increase the popularity of these TV Shows, so much so that they are often referred to as “buddy-cop” shows. These are fundamental to understand how relationships between same-sex leads are developed inside the platonic bubble in which these characters are inserted, so that the audiences do not mistake their rather intimate and close-proximity relationship for anything else other than very close friendship. These relationships are referred to as “bromance” and although they frequently occur between men, the intrinsic themes, symbolic codes and format between male pairs and female pairs are similar enough to analyze them. Therefore, the

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<sup>45</sup> In the early 2010s some crime procedural TV Series were canceled, leading critics to believe this genre and format would not be able to survive in the future as streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video took over the industry. However, in the 2020s, there was a revival of the genre that went on to rival popular TV Shows such as *Squid Games* (2021-) and *Bridgerton* (2020-); see <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/08/business/media/police-crime-tv-shows-streaming.html> for more information on crime and police TV Shows. Accessed 10 Feb. 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Nowadays, there are also mid-season finales but even so a larger part of a crime procedural episodes are filled? with some occasionally brief mentions of the main narrative, thus they can be skipped by audiences.

first step into realizing how compulsory heterosexuality finds ways to disguise itself is through these complex relationships.

*Rizzoli & Isles* is an American procedural crime TV Show, full of nods to queer audiences that follows the lives of Jane Rizzoli, a tough, independent detective which was the youngest officer to become a detective and is characterized by her tomboyish looks, goes with her gut feeling, and frequently puts herself in danger, and Maura Isles, a medical examiner that works in the same precinct as Rizzoli, who is very smart, and does not make any assumptions on the murders until she has all the facts and lacks social skills. As with many TV Series leads, in law enforcement, one of the characters, frequently the man, is goofy, does not follow protocol and is ready to wing their way into a situation, whereas the other, frequently the woman, is set on following the rules, does not show emotions, and has a tragic past that led her to follow a career in law enforcement. Even though eventually their relationship warms up, throughout the seasons there is often a light-hearted rift regarding the different ways of following protocols and procedures (Scott, 2019, p.33).

At the same time, in TV Shows, if not explicitly stated, characters are not to be read as anything other than heterosexual, therefore when Rizzoli or Isles eventually start to develop a relationship with the romantic interest of the season, it is no wonder that the interest is of the opposite gender. What is interesting is that these romantic interests never go anywhere and the TV Show ends with both women “single” and going on a vacation to Paris together.<sup>47</sup> The reason as to why they never go anywhere is due to the obvious “will they/won’t they” prerogative, a clear deferral strategy that evades any commitment to a concrete narrative closure, which keeps the viewers tuning in every week, to see if their chosen couples have finally gotten together and to feel emotionally rewarded when the couple finally does. In *Rizzoli & Isles*, viewers were more interested in checking if their relationship with one-another progressed beyond an intimate relationship. Thus, after seven seasons, viewers had many moments that were clearly hinting at a possible future relationship between them happening, but alas, in the end, only ambiguity of what the future might hold was left.

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<sup>47</sup> In the penultimate episode, Jane Rizzoli goes on a date with a male character that was hastily introduced in the seventh season so that her going with Maura to Paris in the season finale was not too on the nose, regarding their possible activities in the city of love. Thus, although she does not end up exactly single, it is clear that her partner was added, for lack of a better term, as a beard.

Considering queer subtext that occurs between heterosexual characters, the focus will be on a fundamental element of queerbaiting, that of compulsory heterosexuality. This notion, which falls under heteronormativity, is essential in understanding how Jane Rizzoli and Maura Isles' romantic relationships develop throughout the seasons. But first, in order to explain how heterosexually saturated media is, I must mention the "heterosexual script" which endorses traditional gender roles, such as men actively looking for sex and women as trying to establish limits to those sexual advances (Kim *et al.* 2007, p.147). This script is difficult to regulate, since it is a core element of patriarchal society that controls male/female sexuality and gender identity and roles. In the show, there is a specific moment in which "female sexuality for male pleasure" is clear. In the second season, Giovanni, a mechanic that Jane wanted to date, sees Maura and believes she is his soulmate, but she is not interested, so she pretends to be in a relationship with Jane. His reaction shows that he finds their relationship amusing and exciting. Besides this moment, in season 5, episode 4, after a man hits on Jane at a café, Maura tries to deter his advances by telling him, while pointing to Jane, that she is a lesbian. However, the man smiles at this and Jane states "How very open minded of him." This is again another moment in which female sexuality is seen as a source of pleasure for a man, as Jane being a lesbian does not stop his advances, either because he does not recognize her sexuality as real, or because he finds the possibility of her being with other women exciting, "[I]esbian eroticism in the service of male sexuality has been a consistent theme in heterosexual fantasy" (Russo, 1981 apud Joffe, 2020, p.25).

As mentioned, compulsory heterosexuality comes from the belief that humans are inherently "hard-wired" to desire and be attracted to the opposite gender. In TV Series as the ones analyzed here, this notion is frequently obvious if one is to take a closer look at the different relationships that each character has with one another. Using Jane and Maura's relationship, the "bond" they share is profound enough for them to pretend to be together frequently, to engage in displays of affection, such as touches on the back or on the shoulders when passing by, and to share emotionally charged moments with one another. Thus, my point is, if they are so comfortable with one another and in some moments, there are grounds to argue that there could possibly be interest in the same gender, so why are the characters' attraction confined to the opposite gender? Above, Adrienne Rich's work on compulsory heterosexuality states that for many women heterosexuality is forced upon, thus not allowing other sexualities to develop. Jane Rizzoli fits the type of character that, had the TV Show allowed, would have a great development

at exploring her sexuality, starting from her at very least questioning attraction towards Maura Isles and then exploring a possible bisexual identity. Yet, as bisexuals are one of the most underrepresented groups, expecting Jane to fall into this category in the early 2010s as the main character of a TV Show would lead one to be disappointed. Still, throughout the seasons Jane frequently displays behaviors that fall into Rich's argument of women not being able to recognize any other desires that fall outside the heterosexual spectrum. Moments such as flirting with Maura or taking her into consideration when she accepts the offer to the FBI, indicate that she is the closest person to her and that emotionally they connect on levels that do not occur with any other characters. Nonetheless, since emotional bonds among women are deemed "normal" and do not fall outside the intimacy expected of relationships between straight women, this alone would not be enough for Jane to realize that she could possibly long for a deeper connection with Maura. Furthermore, even during the moments in which we see her flirting with Maura, it could still be argued that it is simply playful banter among female friends.

In season 2, episode 13, Jane takes Maura to her high school reunion and, to stop Giovanni from hitting on Maura, they pretend to be a couple and spend most of the episode being touchy-feely with one another, from playful back hugs to Jane gluing a name tag on Maura's lapel. Although they are pretending to be in a relationship, much of the background building of said relationship was already in place as they effortlessly pretended to be a credible couple. At the same time, to viewers, their performance was just a more explicit – as in explicitly stating to be a romantic couple – version of the behavior that they already demonstrate daily, so much so that even though they behave as a couple their demeanor is similar to their usual bickering and flirty moments. In season 3, when Casey, an army lieutenant, proposes to Jane, Maura becomes very upset, leaving Jane alone, so that she does not see her cry. This reaction to the possibility of Jane getting married, while she had not even accepted his proposal yet, subliminally indicates that Maura does not want her to get married. In addition, Maura and Frankie – Jane's brother – start flirting and get involved, and although they have known each other for quite some time, the timing is perfect, as it occurs at the exact same time as that of Jane's engagement. Since Maura does not enjoy talking about Jane's potential marriage, her relationship with Frankie can be read as her trying to move on from Jane and from their "platonic" relationship. This is a moment in which queerbaiting leads to a reinforcement of heteronormativity, instead of having Maura deal with her frustrations by having her act

on the nature of her possible feelings towards Jane. Instead, a male love interest is brought in to reinstate her heterosexuality.

Regarding their relationships with the opposite sex, even though they are heterosexual characters as confirmed by the creator and actresses, they never have a long-lasting relationship and after many male interests throughout the seasons, they end the show with them spending some time together in Paris. Furthermore, an interesting approach that TV Series have when it comes to the subject of compulsory heterosexuality is by posing a distinct binarism between heterosexuality and homosexuality, in this binarism there are quite a few queer identities that are never mentioned. Although asexuality is making this binarism rather complex, as it inherently denies any possible sexual connection with either opposite or same-sex gender, my point here is on how frequently bisexuality is erased in contemporary media. Taking as an example episode 6 of season 1, aptly named “I Kissed a Girl”, why is it that in this episode there are quite a few mentions of possibly being in gay relationships, but not once is bisexuality ever mentioned? When discussing the advances made by nurse Jorge, that was “too submissive”, Jane states, “If I wanted someone to walk the dog and talk about feelings, I would be gay”, then why not bisexual? Does liking women automatically deny attraction to men?

Media depictions of bisexuality frequently deem bisexual individuals as indecisive and, in the case of women, this bisexuality normally “occurs” when they are in college and eventually “grow” to choose either one sexuality or the other, but never stay bisexual (Diamond, 2005, p.106). On TV, some examples of this are Willow, from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and Karen, in *Will & Grace* (1998-2020), the former after having had relationships with men and women declares herself a lesbian due to the pressure exerted by her girlfriend (Grafanakis, 2020, p.3), and the later declaring herself heterosexual after her girlfriend states that she cannot be with a bisexual woman, forcing Grace to choose a side. These portrayals might be called bi-erasure, as characters are either never taken seriously in their sexuality, are forced to pick one side of the binarism, or are just indecisive promiscuous individuals (Cook, 2018, p.14). Jane being an attractive, well-established woman in her 30s could not be depicted as a character that is indecisive or curious because eventually her fertile age will start to decline, and she would not be able to find a male suitor in her forties, when she is past her prime age

because this would challenge patriarchal institutions.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Jane, as one of the leads of the show that is successful and has a stable life, which allows many viewers to identify with her, if she were to be portrayed as a lesbian woman, viewers would identify with her but not on a sexual level and would draw a line between them and Jane. However, if she were to be bisexual, viewers would have a hard time drawing a line between where the Jane that likes men ends and where the Jane that likes women starts, due to media depictions of bisexuals.

Consequently, compulsory heterosexuality forces female characters to be confined in their “supposed” attraction to the opposite gender, since lesbianism is viewed as a phase and bisexuality is not even considered a possibility, as Lisa Diamond argues in:

... young women consuming media images of heteroflexibility will continue to be reliably channeled toward heterosexuality, yet may come away with the notion that this outcome was an entirely personal choice based on their natural predispositions rather than a heterosexist sociopolitical context. (109)

Therefore, the only other way that they have of subtly exploring their sexuality is through very close relationships with other women that are frequently disguised under homosocial bonding.

## 4.2 Heteroflexibility and Homosocial Bonds

Because homosocial bonding is rather popular in mainstream media, it becomes a central part in the narrative which revolves around conflicts pertaining to the very deep bond that the characters share. From narratives that portray to come to terms with possibly being gay, as seen in *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010) (Nettleton, 2016, p.129) to running off together after one is diagnosed with a terminal illness, in *House M.D.* (2004-2012), there is no shortage of scripts that include same-sex platonic relationships. Thus, I am going to focus now on how this compulsory sexuality restricts and hinders Jane and Maura’s relationship. First of all, it is essential to understand that primarily homosocial bonding is a relationship among men in which women serve as an exchange object. Currently these

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<sup>48</sup> Ageism in TV Shows is not to be explored in this work, but it is important to bear in mind that lead characters, especially women in law enforcement TV Shows, are often in their early 30s, so that they are still in their prime.

bonds are mostly seen in bromance movies in which women work as the “other” that prevents these homosocial bonds to take place. While in these movies men develop very close intimate relationships, they remain on a platonic level that does not leave any space for romantic desire, whereas simultaneously they are more valuable than heterosexual relationships and sometimes occur at the expense of misogynistic behavior. It also allows networks and producers to establish profound bonds whose intent does not go beyond close friendships, thus preventing romantic desire among members of the same gender.

To begin with, the TV Show *Rizzoli & Isles* is based on a book series written by Tess Gerritsen, whose first book was published in 2001 with the title *The Surgeon*. In this series, the relationship between Jane and Maura, although close, is not to the same extent that we see in the show. Although the focus is not on the comparison between the novel and the TV adaptation, I must mention that in the books Jane eventually gets married with Casey, an army lieutenant and eventually has a daughter. In the television adaptation, however, the show constantly reminds the viewers of the fact that they are heterosexual, yet the relationships that they have never last long. Jane and Maura’s relationship is the most emotionally connected and profound relationship that is ever established on the show. They understand each other’s fears and pet peeves, they bicker like an old married couple and most importantly they just connect on a level that is not ever established with any of the male romantic interests. Although none of this falls out of the ordinary, what I aim to answer is if these characters are so intimately connected with one another that they even overcome discomforts that they have with other characters, why is that there is never a step into taking this bond they share a step further?

Throughout the show there are many moments that clearly demonstrate that these two characters share a very deep bond, for instance, they sometimes sleep in the same bed (fully clothed, of course), talking about their fantasies and taking the other into consideration, the same way one would with a partner, when making life altering decisions. These moments, which could be read as a way of exploring female intimacy and relationships on-screen, similar to the way in which bromances allowed for new masculine identities to develop, would be very progressive especially in the early 2010s. Nevertheless, while doing so they fall on the same trap of not developing the relationship beyond a platonic friendship bursting with sexually charged moments, which, as established, is part of the generic homosocial bonding in which women mingle with women, men mingle with men, and when opposite genders mingle it is with the intent of

having a sexual relationship. Even though both Rizzoli and Isles have male friendships, none of their relationships are as intimate as the one that they share with one another.

On heteroflexibility, the 6<sup>th</sup> episode of the 1<sup>st</sup> season is a rather interesting moment to be analyzed, in the interactions of Rizzles (the ship name of the main characters which is a portmanteau of the names Rizzoli + Isles), in which Jane and Maura have to go undercover at a lesbian bar because a murder occurred there.<sup>49</sup> Ignoring the fact that the medical examiner would never be called to actively participate in investigations much less go undercover, and that Jane is without backup.<sup>50</sup> There is a specific moment when Maura is working as a waitress and is serving drinks to Jane and her supposed date; she leans in, and Jane looks at Maura's breasts. Jane does so in a suggestive manner that can be ambiguously interpreted, as it is not clear whether she is looking because she is pretending to be a lesbian, which frankly would be insulting to her "date", or if she is looking because she desires Maura. As mentioned, when the original text is ambiguous, or at least leaves enough gaps for viewers to clue in from their own backgrounds and experiences, the final interpretations differ. Hence, for a straight viewer this scene could have just been Jane trying to play the part, whereas a queer viewer read this scene as Jane realizing that maybe she is also interested in women. Simultaneously, recognizing these moments is not limited to queer viewers, since by opposition this idea defends that the "straight view" is the default view, thus "otherizing" queer viewers. This episode is particularly interesting, as it contains allusions to possible queer relationships and discussions of female/male gender roles in a relationship. In addition, having been broadcasted so early into the season shows what tone they were trying to set; "I Kissed a Girl" (a reference to Katy Perry's song of the same name) served as a reminder to the audiences that even if there is playful banter between Jane and Maura that leads to sexually charged scenes, these characters are straight and do not want to engage in any romantic or sexual manner.

Later, in the second season, there is a promo video that shows them trying speed dating, which was perhaps written to remind the audiences that these women are

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<sup>49</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, the word "ship", which is derived from relationship, is used to describe relationships of romantic and/or sexual nature. To ship a couple means to have a desire for them to be together which can range from fictional characters to real life personalities and is frequently actualized through non-official works, such as fanfics and fan edits. In this case, those who ship Rizzles would like for them to be a romantic couple within the show and enjoy their interactions on screen.

<sup>50</sup> Although Jane explains why Maura is going, "I don't have time to train a female detective on how to collect and preserve DNA", it would still be dangerous and reckless to put a medical examiner in an undercover task with a potential criminal.



interested in men. Nevertheless, by the end of it, after the dates end up being a bust, they decide to have a date with each other, while the voice over states “Rizzoli and Isles a perfect match!”. Even though it was done for a promo, the intent to ambiguously promote the relationship in this manner is interesting. Because one cannot help but wonder just why the show is so interested in framing their relationship as an almost lover situation that could possibly be actualized on-screen.

There is an abundance of heterosexual couples in media whose romantic tropes and relationship development narratives are derivative and follow the imposed patriarchal discourse. As Diana Anselmo argues in “Gender Queer Fan Labor on Tumblr”, queer fans use queer cryptography to find and recognize any possible queer representation. These include analyzing the subtext, reading backwards, and textual poaching, or even analyzing the social media advertising that the show employs, among others (2018, p.85). These techniques allow viewers to defend their reading of a character’s sexuality, as well as to defend themselves from accusations of being delusional and seeing things that are not happening. Additionally, by poaching the original text, they transform it to actualize that which cannot or will not be actualized in the original text. Nonetheless, the show has frequently given the viewers moments that could easily be read as something more, without even having to resort to textual poaching. Janet Tamaro, who developed the show, stated in an interview to *TV Guide* that, “the lesbian theory endlessly amuses me, and it amuses the cast too” (Snarker, 2011).<sup>51</sup> This word choice is interesting; it is as if the show is not deliberately playing heavy on the subtext and the fans are just trying to read too much into it. Furthermore, in an interview to the *Advocate*, Sasha Alexander, when prompted to elaborate on the lesbian label that has been attributed to the show stated “[...] I mean, you know, it’s such a strange thing because people are always going to get from any film or TV or book or anything they want, what they want to see. And that is all of our right to do so. I mean, it’s completely subjective and that is, that is art.” (insert date of the interview) It is art and its inherent subjectiveness and widespread availability leads to diverse interpretations. Nonetheless, in the case of *Rizzoli & Isles*, it was not just a matter of different interpretations or of “reading too much into the text”, if such a thing even exists, but of ambiguous depictions whose intent is to invite viewers to read into the text and to draw their own conclusions. Even though it was not expected for the characters to get together, as the creator stated that the characters were heterosexual, these remarks

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<sup>51</sup> <https://afterellen.com/rizzoli-isles-arent-gay-they-just-act-that-way/> Accessed 10 Apr. 2023.

do not create a healthy relationship between the producer and the audiences.<sup>52</sup> At the time it was obvious that it was queerbaiting, and even so it did not stop audiences from tuning in and the show ended the first season with an average of 8.7 million viewers per episode (Stanley, 2011).<sup>53</sup>

Female heterosexuality in mainstream media contains characteristics of heteroflexibility whose key aspects, among others, are attracting young male models and same sex experimentation to confirm heterosexuality. On-screen, it is used because they reinforce hegemonic discourse, while also generating money through the queer community. These depictions portray sexual identification as a trivial matter – whenever a character is, for instance, homosexual, their struggle to come out is frequently rooted in their own fears or in the prejudice that other characters display but not in society as a whole. In other words, pretending that there are other types of sexuality besides heterosexuality and that “choosing” them does not bring any social and political disadvantages is a constant in media. As Diamond writes, “such depictions of same sex sexuality reliably serve a dominant social order that continues to put a fight the regulation and control of female sexuality.” (2005, 109), paired with Rich’s notion of compulsory heterosexuality, “being straight” is regarded as natural and female sexuality is at best allowed to venture outside of society’s bounds, if it is done to confirm heterosexuality. I would argue that the possible reason as to why they did not go this route with Jane Rizzoli might simply be because they did not want the audiences to doubt Jane’s “straightness”. Furthermore, the show was already facing accusations from fans of playing too much into queer subtext, thus using heteroflexibility would just infuriate audiences even more. Simultaneously, heteroflexibility allows characters to establish themselves as heterosexual without resorting to homophobic jokes or remarks. Even though in the past being repulsed at the possibility of queerness was used to assert heterosexuality, nowadays it would be unthinkable to employ such a tactic, hence it is best to allow characters to experiment with other sexualities if it asserts heterosexuality. The “I’m not a Lesbian and I know it because I’ve tried it” is so frequent that it became known as a

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<sup>52</sup> On an interesting note, in the above-mentioned interview Sasha Alexander stated “[t]heir relationship; it could be sexual one day, I mean, they’re not gay in the books. But who knows?” this interview occurred in 2012 and as is common with this show, it allowed for viewers to feel a sliver of hope at the possibility of these characters ever getting together.

<sup>53</sup> According to data in the *LA Times*: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-xpm-2011-jul-03-la-ca-rizzoli-isles-20110703-story.html> Accessed 15 Apr. 2023.

trope called “Experimented in College”.<sup>54</sup> This goes to show how entertainment finds a way to display intimate homosocial bonds without having to deny heterosexuality. Despite that, the norms which regulate these bonds and the extent to which heteroflexibility becomes homosexuality depend heavily on whether it is a bond among women or among men. Take, for instance, the TV Show *Hawaii Five-0* (2010-2020) broadcasted by CBS, which depicted a very close relationship between the two male leads, in which they called each other “babe” and frequently said “I love you”; still, it would be hard for them to have a conversation in which they discuss whether they are each other’s types or not, as Jane and Maura did. Hence, whereas relationships among men are becoming closer and more open, between women they are frequently more intimate and more prone to play into sexual tension, which, paired with the frequent emotional bonds that these characters display with one another, turn those actions into those to be expected in a romantic relationship. Being the boundaries blurry and so exploited by studios to create ambiguously close relationships, it is not difficult to understand why audiences read different relationships as close. From choices in the lighting of the scene to the background music, there are ambiguous ways for producers to display subtext that allows queer viewers to fill in the gaps that the show leaves.

A scene that leaves some ambiguities occurs at the end of season 6 episode 3: Jane goes to Maura’s home and after some domestic dialogue, Jane tells her she brought a movie that she characterizes as an “[a]ction movie with emotional resonance”. Then, in a rather not so subtle line, Maura says “Well we are both unique individuals and yet we have found a common connection.” Then they bicker about which one of them is Yin and Yang, since that is a good description of their bond with one another. The movie that Jane is referring to is *Thelma and Louise* (1991), which is famous for the epic female duo that drives off a cliff together after kissing and embracing each other. Thus, Maura is comparing her “connection” with Jane to that of Thelma and Louise which throughout the movie to develop a connection that goes beyond homosocial bonding and explores female intimacy. Another ambiguous scene occurs in season 6, episode 2, when Kent, a recent addition to the cast that works for the M. E’s Office, is interested in Jane and asks Maura, “You two have a unique relationship don’t you?”, to which Maura answers “I’m still trying to figure it out.” Later in episode 10, Kent and Maura have a conversation regarding dating policies (Kent had kissed Maura and they cannot date because she is his

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<sup>54</sup> See <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ExperimentedInCollege> for more information on the term as well as examples of shows with this trope. Accessed 24 Apr. 2023.

superior) and eventually he asks if there are any rules against dating someone from the Police Department, subsequent episodes show that he is interested in Jane. However, after asking Kent if they are talking about Jane he walks away with a smirk on his face without answering, while Maura asks, “Are you messing with me again?” This dialogue paired with the one in episode 2 could be read as Kent trying to subtly let Maura know that maybe she likes Jane. Were Jane a man, this dialogue would be read as a potential foreshadowing of Maura realizing that there is nothing stopping her from dating Jane. But alas, being both women led those scenes to be read as Kent being the one interested in Jane, instead of Maura.

Ultimately, homosocial relationships are characterized by their emotional attachment to a member of the same gender. However, even though this attachment and bond is found in heterosexual relationships, what differentiates these two is the denial of sexual desire in homosociality. These are similar to the way in which homosexual relationships are presented as neutral and asexual. Nevertheless, homosexual relationships acknowledge the existence of a possible sexual desire even if not portrayed (Joffe, 2020, p.62).

### **4.3 Queer Coding Heterosexual Characters**

Being these platonic bonds an integral part in forming partnerships in mainstream media, it is important to understand that these are not the basis of queerbaiting accusations. They originate from the bonds in which the characters are queer coded into stereotypes that do not serve as representation considering they do not leave the realm of the subtext. Additionally, these alienate queer audiences that acknowledge this subtext since they are prone to be harassed online and in fan conventions. Queerbaiting accusations appear frequently when there is heavy queer subtext among characters that are both heterosexual. Hence my point is, why are there so many queer readings between characters that, inferring from their relationship history, have no interest in the same gender? To clarify, this is not to suggest that characters must have a fixed sexuality, however if there is no intent of ever depicting sexual fluidity, what is the purpose behind creating all this subtext? While finding an answer to this issue would be ideal, the purpose of this work is not to dwell on the reasons as to why TV Series frequently employ this tactic. Nevertheless, it is an essential part in understanding how, in so many shows, one can find queer subtext among heterosexual characters. Furthermore, when queer coding characters, there are

specific symbols that must be considered. This allows audiences that read those codes to understand, in a more subtle manner, how these are to be read; a key element of this coding has to do with gender expression, “[...] gender refers to the behaviors and attitudes that form the basis of people being perceived as feminine women, androgynous women, masculine women, masculine men, and so on.” (Walker, 2019, p.18). Hence, for instance, masculine women are read as butch lesbians and effeminate men as winks. These expressions are also popular in villains and comic relief characters that reinforce queer stereotypes. Disney has notoriously queer coded many villains, from Jafar, in *Aladdin* (1992) to Scar, in *The Lion King* (1994), these representations depicted queer traits as evil (Walker, 2019, p.13).

Throughout the 7 seasons, neither Jane nor Maura develop any relationships with women, only with men, thus one can assume that these characters are heterosexual, or at least their relationship history does not indicate any other sexual identity. Considering that, and following the assumption that the production crew knew that their relationship was not to be consumed – as Angie Harmon stated in an interview for the *LA Times*, “The characters are straight, if that upsets anyone I’m sorry” –, why was there so much queer coding and subtext between the two leads? (Stanley, 2011)<sup>55</sup> First, one must understand to what extent these characters were queer coded, a feature that led *Buzzfeed* author Sarah Karlan to characterize the show as the “Gayest Nongay Show on Television” and *AfterEllen* author Dorothy Snarker to described it as “TV’s first lesbian buddy cop show (it just doesn’t know it)”.<sup>56</sup>

To begin with, as mentioned, even before analyzing specific scenes in which either the dialogue or the acting choices, among other *mise-en-scene* devices, heavily implied queer readings, their relationship is filled with tropes that are normally either destined for male/female leads, such as those seen in other crime procedural shows such as *Bones* (2005-2017) or *Castle* (2009-2016).<sup>57</sup> Jane Rizzoli dresses and behaves in a more stereotypically masculine manner, does not like to talk about feelings, and dislikes physical affection, wears pantsuits and low flat shoes, she is the detective, she is

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<sup>55</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-xpm-2011-jul-03-la-ca-rizzoli-isles-20110703-story.html>  
Accessed 15 Apr. 2023.

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.buzzfeed.com/skarlan/rizzoli-and-isles-admits-to-playing-it-up-for-the-lesbian-fa> and <https://afterellen.com/rizzoli-isles-is-tvs-first-lesbian-buddy-cop-show-it-just-doesnt-know-it-yet/>  
Accessed 28 Apr. 2023.

<sup>57</sup> This dialogue often has many “gaps” that are filled by the audiences; however, this becomes a problem when one realizes that different audiences with different backgrounds will read these moments and lines in different manners, thus leading them to interpret their relationship in a different manner.

physically the stronger one. Maura Isles dresses in a very feminine manner, in tight dresses and high heels, she is very intelligent, and in some moments, Rizzoli asks her to dumb down for the non-academics around her; due to her emotional inaptitude she is sometimes referred to as “The Queen of the Dead”. At the time, rarely would there be two female leads in a prime-time TV Show, thus the show was at first a hit for its premise of two women solving crimes. Nonetheless, while it was obvious from the promotional photos that the intent was on developing a close relationship between Rizzoli and Isles, writers and actresses realized how popular their show was in the lesbian community, so with every season there was more subtext to be analyzed and “dissected” by fans. This subtext clearly shows how much thought was put into leading the audiences to believe that there was sexual tension between them; however, the issue that will be exposed below occurs whenever this desire is laughed off and promptly denied.

Specifically focusing on Jane Rizzoli, it is important to understand that all of Rizzoli’s descriptions could be easily summarized with the word “butch”. Nevertheless, as that would be “too on the nose” for heterosexual audiences, her characterization is done with a very generic 2010s tomboyish look that allows viewers to perceive her as more “masculine” but not as a lesbian. As she is, throughout the seasons, a heterosexual woman, how exactly is she coded in a queer way that has led audiences to complain about the blatant homoerotic tension between the two main characters, and most specifically about Jane Rizzoli as a closeted Butch woman? It stems from the interest that Jane seems to have in Maura, for instance, Jane’s aversion to being hugged by family members or by love interests. It is quickly established that she does not enjoy physical affection. Nonetheless, with Maura, whether it be passing touches, or moments of full embrace, such as the ones seen in Rizzoli’s most emotional scenes, she is clearly more at ease with being emotionally open and physically affective with Maura than with her own mother. Adding this to the fact that Rizzoli is sometimes mistaken for being a lesbian, due to her appearance and behavior, as seen in the 5<sup>th</sup> episode of the 2<sup>nd</sup> season. After Jane exchanges clothes with Maura, to make her more feminine for a police undercover operation, she states, “I got hit on twice! By women!”. In the 6<sup>th</sup> episode of the 1<sup>st</sup> season, in which, after creating a fake profile in an online lesbian dating site, Maura states that if it were not for her, Jane would have been butch. These moments establish Rizzoli as a character whose symbolism is that of a lesbian woman. Therefore, even though she is heterosexual, Jane is written to represent butch lesbian women who work in law enforcement and do not enjoy or partake in any stereotypically coded “feminine activities”, such as buying shoes

and dressing up. As Scott argues, “[q]ueerbaiting relies on characters occupying a type of liminal space; they are canonically straight, but exhibit a variety of queer behaviors or markers.” (2019, p.11).

In an interview that Angie Harmon gave in 2014 to the *HuffPost Live*, she stated that Jane Rizzoli is portrayed in a tomboy way because when Harmon was studying a real Boston Police Department, she realized that women in that environment had to “hide their femininity” and “fade into the group as much as possible”.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the pantsuit that seems characteristic of masculinized femininity is an inherent characteristic of women in law enforcement. However, if gender is viewed as socially constructed, as Butler defends, and if the performances that are deemed inherent to gender are also absorbed and performed in a manner that supports the belief of this as natural and perpetuates the idea of an ingrained behavior, then Angie Harmon’s portrayal of Jane Rizzoli as a tomboyish law enforcement squad leader is a reiteration of the hegemonic discourse. In this performance Jane is to the audience everything that Maura is not: she is not feminine, she does not align with stereotypical gender roles, but she does align with the 2010s expected portrayals of women in power in law enforcement. Hence, while both leads are women, their contrast in gender expression reinforces heterosexist discourses of gender roles associated to specific behaviors and expressions.

In the *Buzzfeed* article titled “*Rizzoli And Isles*” Admits To Playing It Up For The Lesbian Fans”, published in 2013, which contains snippets from an interview that cast and producers had given to *TV Guide*, it is confirmed that the characters are straight. Nonetheless, most of the outside media generated by the show frequently played into the fans’ fantasies of seeing this couple become a real thing.<sup>59</sup> From promos as the one in the second season indicating that, after several bad speed dates, they decided to have a date themselves, to promotional posters as the one produced for the fourth season, to social media posts by the actresses with the hashtag #RIZZLES, social media marketing pertaining to the show mostly focuses on the couple, that in interviews they are so adamant to deny as being real. In an interview to *TV Guide*, actress Sasha Alexander, who portrays Maura Isles, stated: “There’s nothing gay about them. What’s Gay? That Jane

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<sup>58</sup> “Angie Harmon Talks Lesbian Tension On ‘Rizzoli And Isles’.” YouTube, HuffPost Live, 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Although these marketing practices were not new and are frequently employed by networks to create more media furor through fan labor by keeping the show trending on twitter or by having many searches on Google, it is a practice that, for instance, lead many Sherlock fans to be upset after social media managers of BBC accounts blatantly retweeted and posted content alluding to the a possible relationship between John and Sherlock that in the end of the TV Show resulted in nothing and made fans dissatisfied by the obvious queerbaiting that was appearing on social media.

has a raspy voice?” Although I do not intend to discuss whether they are gay or not, as it is rather hard to define what being gay is, the show clearly plays into queerbaiting practices and one does not need to look further than the show itself to realize this. Interviews show the real intent behind certain scenes, as actress Angie Harmon, who plays Jane Rizzoli stated, “Sometimes we’ll do a take for a demo, I’ll brush by [Maura’s] blouse or maybe linger for a moment”, even though it was obvious that most of their on-screen moments and even dialogue were intended to keep the show “interesting”, certain statements made by the actress led fans to accuse them of being homophobic (Snarker, 2013).<sup>60</sup> Later, Harmon also stated, “[a]s long as we’re not being accused of being homophobic, which is not in any way true and completely infuriating, I’m OK with it.”, which means that if we are queerbaiting audiences by creating sexual tension between two women, which plays with their expectations of ever seeing a same-sex couple on-screen, and we can get away with it without being called homophobic, then we can keep doing it.<sup>61</sup>

As queer coding mostly falls on stereotypes of the different queer identities, both Jane and Maura fall into the expected lesbian stereotypes perpetuated in media that do not challenge homonormative notions of queerness. Jane being the more masculine of the two is a butch lesbian, whereas Maura due to her femininity is coded as a lipstick lesbian. Furthermore, overly feminine characters are more prone to have an affair with another woman, mostly to play into the male-gaze dynamics. While in *Rizzoli and Isles* Maura never explicitly has a lesbian relationship, there is a particular scene in which Jane asks Maura “Is it true what they say about French Women?”, to which Maura responds: “I don’t know, I’ve never been with a French Woman.” This dialogue, which did not add anything to the episode, has Maura ambiguously stating that she had not been with a French woman but not rejecting the possibility of being with a woman.

Queer coding without the intent of being actualized on-screen harms the queer community, especially online, as fans are frequently called delusional for wanting a same-sex couple to actually be portrayed on-screen (Scott, 2019, p.5). While most of these fans find comfort in being able to produce fanfics and fan edits, it does not compare with the

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<sup>60</sup> <https://afterellen.com/rizzoli-isles-cover-tv-guide-and-talk-that-demo-meaning-us/> Accessed 28 Apr. 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Regarding same-sex representation on screen and leading audiences on, David Jenkins, creator of *Our Flag Means Death* (2022-) stated that until the two male leads kissed, in the 9<sup>th</sup> episode, many fans were still weary on whether the show would explicitly actualize their relationship on screen, or if they were going to be confined to the subtext, despite the obvious build up to a romantic relationship that the show was trying to create.



emotional reward of seeing these couples become part of the canon. As much as with heterosexual couples, fans feel rewarded after seasons of “will they/ won’t they” to see the couple finally get together after countless “coitus interruptus” moments and seasons filled with sexual tension. While with heterosexual couples fans know that eventually they will become canon, whenever there is a pairing that comprises two characters of the same-gender, fans are called unrealistic for reading too much into the text and for pushing their agenda on to characters.<sup>62</sup> As Emily Roach argues,

[t]he couple will work long hours in close proximity. They may save one another from mortal danger. There’s grudging respect, increased intimacy and an undercurrent of erotic tension, jealousy or flirtatious jokes. [...] The difference is that the opposite sex twosomes all have moments of canon romance and in most cases, the het couple was endgame. The same sex couples do not. (2017)<sup>63</sup>

While the majority of heterosexual friendships result in a romantic relationship, the same does not occur in same-sex pairings, even though those are riddled with the same romantic tropes that are seen in heterosexual couples, from Steve and Danny from *Hawaii Five-0* (2010-2020) to Emma and Regina in *Once Upon A Time* (2011-2018). Same-sex pairings are seen in a wide variety of genres. However, the amount of these pairings that ever gets to be in a romantic relationship is rather low. Maura and Jane are an example of opposites attract, from their bickering to their sexual tension filled moments, their relationship echoes that of Brennan and Booth from the show *Bones* (2005-2017) or that of Mulder and Scully from *The X-Files* (1993-2018).<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, while those couples became canon, Rizzoli and Isles did not, and their relationship is seen as a close friendship whereas all the others are described as soulmates. Ultimately, queer coding can occur through a variety of forms, thus *Rizzoli & Isles*, while progressive for its era, still plays into the same queerbaiting techniques that were for instance seen in the 1990s with *Xena: The Princess Warrior*. While it could have been a groundbreaking show, it was still

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<sup>62</sup> Even if the show is cancelled before the couple gets to be together, producers will either try to make them a couple in the last episodes, such as in *Lucifer* (2016-2021). which was canceled in the third season but still allowed the couple to at least find closure. The show was eventually picked up by Netflix that made canon and developed Lucifer and Chloe’s relationship. In TV Series that have romantic triangles the expectation is still for a heterosexual relationship.

<sup>63</sup> See <https://www.themarysue.com/queerbaiting-and-heteronormativity-on-tv/> for more information on tv shows that use queerbaiting techniques to maintain heteronormativity. Accessed 15 Apr. 2023.

<sup>64</sup> The show was revived in 2016 and lasted until 2018.

falling into the same comfortable and profitable marketing techniques in which queerness is heavily exploited.

#### **4.4 Queer Baiting and the humorous dimension of queerness**

The way in which these shows display intimate same-sex relationships is intimately connected with how symbols associated with queerness are read. Hence, a major issue in queer coding heterosexual characters is that the possibility of said character being queer is humorous at best and ludicrous at worst. As previously established, Jane Rizzoli is the one who, out of the two, is more heavily queer coded. From her roughhousing with her brother, to liking sports and other characters assuming she is a lesbian, there is no question that she is the depiction of a butch woman. Therefore, why are the moments in which she is openly flirting with Maura, for instance, the sexual tension felt when she is zipping up Maura's dress while saying she looks sexy, done in an amusing playful manner to entertain the viewers? The reason for this occurs because queerness is seen as a form of entertainment to audiences (Scott, 2019, p.11). In media depictions, queer characters frequently fall on stereotypes of not having any other character trait besides being queer and of falling to maintain a stable relationship. Moreover, their indecisiveness and obsession with sexuality is often written for comic relief (Gonta et al. 2017, p.23). As Muñoz's work explains, queerness is utopia and unreachable considering that when it gets to be assimilated by mainstream media it is always a censored version that does not threaten audiences. Simultaneously, by diffusing it in a playful manner it does not create a challenge to the patriarchal structure.

Being Jane Rizzoli a heterosexual woman creates scenes in which her queer coding is just for laughs, as seen in the moment in which Maura and Jane are discussing a potential love interest for Maura, after some back-and-forth Jane eventually says: "But I am interesting and you don't want to sleep with me." Maura gives her a look and Jane asks, "Do you?", this line is mostly written for comedic purposes, thus, not to be taken seriously because, as frequently seen in queer coding, the idea is to laugh at the possibility of any of these characters being anything other than straight. However, any queer viewer would interpret this scene as a way of showing that Jane is not sure if Maura is interested in her or not. In the episode *I Kissed a Girl*, Jane stated that she would "flip" presumably to a lesbian for front row tickets of a Celtics game. Of course, this scene is played for laughs, but the joke is on the fickleness of sexuality, as if one could easily flip a switch,

choose another sexuality and have no repercussions.<sup>65</sup> This scene establishes her even more as a repressed butch lesbian, Maura being her exact opposite and constantly reminding the viewers of all the femininity that Jane does not display does not help in her depictions.

To be able to portray this queerness, *mise-en-scene* plays a major part in creating the subtext that allows for audiences to differently interpret the scenes. Therefore, I could not conclude this first analysis without mentioning the soundtrack and background music, as well as the lighting of the show that so frequently and subconsciously clues in audiences on how to read the scenes. In some scenes between Jane and Maura there is either a comic background sound that transforms the scene from lighthearted into playful or the lighting, which is frequently lost on viewers and has yellowish warm tones that prompts audiences to feel warm and secure (Kurt and Osueke, 2014, p.4). At the same time, these warm tones can also give a sense of caution, which could be interpreted by audiences to be clued into the possible endless interpretations of a scene, while simultaneously proceeding carefully as they are ambiguous. These scenes contrast with the cool tones used in murder scenes or whenever there is an interrogation of a suspect, although their use of lighting was not as blatantly obvious as, for instance, that of *Supernatural*'s, whenever Dean and Castiel shared a scene alone; it was still obvious that some scenes between Maura and Jane were set a tone of banter, even if slightly romantic.

Regarding the dialogue, it is either ambiguous, thus allowing the viewers to fill the gaps, or explicit but in a playful manner. At certain moments, it is possible to discern how either queerness or different gender behaviors are to be read as funny. In the 1<sup>st</sup> season, halfway through episode 6, Maura and Jane bond over profiles of women hitting on Jane online, eventually leading to the following dialogue, in which Maura first asks: "I wonder what kind of women we would like if we liked women", to which Jane, surprised by Maura's statement, says: "What? Well first of all, I would be the guy." Maura says that it's a cliché, they bicker, and eventually Maura states: "It's a good thing you're not my type", to which Jane asks: "What do you mean I'm not your type? That is so rude." Yes, Jane, it is rude to the audience since this entire scene, besides letting the viewers know that they are going undercover at a lesbian bar, which did not need this full dialogue,

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<sup>65</sup> In TV Shows, homophobia, just like racism, exists in the prejudice and bigotry of specific characters but not in society as a whole, thus leading to moments in which heterosexual characters, state, "It's the 21<sup>st</sup> century, being gay is fine, no one cares." These moments are also paired with said queer characters being encouraged to come out, since society is not homophobic, hence, they would not face repercussions for their sexuality.

is mostly just there to remind viewers that these characters are straight, but if they were lesbians, they would not be each other's type. They eventually fall asleep in the same bed and, in the morning, after receiving ten emails from Jorge (the nurse), Jane tells Maura, since she was the one that introduced Jorge to Jane, "what you think of as a great guy, is an average woman." So, she is either saying that great guys are women or that Maura sees them as women, in any respect, it is a curious way to put it. It is also leaning onto sexist depictions of "great guys" being, for lack of a better term, "whimps", and it does not help that earlier in the episode Korsak calls him (Jorge) a sissy. These types of messages are rather damaging, as they reinforce stereotypical portrayals of masculinities and of what is expected that women want in a relationship. Connecting this to the heterosexual script, Jorge is a character that teaches young adult men that being too nice is not good because it makes them look like a woman – concurrently, this contrasts with the zeitgeisty depictions of new masculinities frequently seen in bromance movies. Jane then eventually says "If I wanted someone to walk the dog with me and talk about my feelings, I'd be gay." This dialogue equates talking about feelings as something that women do and that is not desirable for men to do. In season 2, episode 3, when they pretend to be a couple Jane describes her relationship with Maura as "lifelong best friends forever, get it?" Yes, the audience gets that they are being baited into a possible lesbian relationship and it is funny to play into queer subtextual coding as a marketing strategy, if it is quickly assured that neither of the characters are homosexual. In season 4, Jane starts dating army Lieutenant Charles "Casey" Jones and, in episode 12, there is an interesting dialogue between Casey and Jane in which, after he does most of the household chores in Jane's house, she comments the following: "Really? You're like a 17<sup>th</sup> century wife", Casey asks if that is a good or a bad thing, to which Jane answers, "Oh, well, fantastic! I've always wanted a wife!" Even though the purpose of this scene is to showcase that Casey is a man who enjoys doing household chores, thus making him ideal for Jane, this dialogue again leans onto sexist depictions of gender behaviors and roles. Moreover, while these scenes are short and infrequent, whenever they appear, they do so in a playful light-hearted way that tries to defuse the harmful messages that they contain. Just like Jorge being too "submissive", Jane's comparison of Casey to a 17<sup>th</sup> century wife and him joking about doing household chores, "What do you want to do today? Watch me churn butter or beat the dust from the rugs?", show that frivolous misogynistic jokes are not to be taken seriously. Aside from that, the possibility of Jane truly wanting a wife is ludicrous because, as stated, she is not interested in women.

On a final note, in an interview to *TV Guide*, Angie Harmon, in response to threatening messages from the fans, stated, “It was like ‘we’re not going to watch your show because you won’t write them making out.”(*Huffpost*, 2013)<sup>66</sup> In these interactions between audiences and cast, it is rather difficult to separate those which express a concern over the marketing strategies that the show uses to attract queer viewers and those just trolling for attention (Scott, 2018, p.146). In addition, Harmon’s statement is diminishing those who do not wish to support TV Series that blatantly use queerbaiting techniques, that are then dismissed online as just “amazing chemistry between the actress”. It is understandable why audiences that are rooting for this couple to get together, do not wish to become emotionally invested in a pairing that will not go beyond interrupted edging. Ultimately, producers and actresses were forthcoming of the fact that both characters were heterosexual and the intent, as seen by frequently pairing them with men, was not on having them get together by the end of the show. However, as shown, many moments were clearly magnified with the intent of their relationship being more alluring not just to queer audiences, but also to men to whom lesbian eroticism is seen as titillating. Furthermore, as this is a TV Show, depictions of gender expression are intimately connected with what audiences believe to be the norms to follow in society. Therefore, accurate representations of specific groups and communities are important, as TV is the best media to diffuse messages that could allow society to move from places of bigotry and prejudice.

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<sup>66</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/angie-harmon-lesbian-rizzoli-isles-fans\\_n\\_3779182](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/angie-harmon-lesbian-rizzoli-isles-fans_n_3779182) Accessed 23 Apr. 2023.

## 5. *Supergirl* Analysis

### 5.1 Queer Representation and Stereotypes

As stated in the previous paragraph, the Rizzoli and Isles couple was never canon, thus, although fans accused the show of queerbaiting, there could not be a discussion on queer representations, as officially there were no queer characters.<sup>67</sup> However, the next show to be analyzed had queer representation, in the form of a lesbian couple and a transgender woman, while also facing queerbaiting accusations due to the eroticism between the female leads.<sup>68</sup> *Supergirl* (2015-2021), broadcasted by The CW Television Network, whose main premise revolves around the life of Kara Zor-El, an alien from Krypton who came to earth to protect her cousin Kal-El, also known as Superman. In the 1<sup>st</sup> season, she establishes herself as Supergirl and throughout the seasons she fights specific villains that bring harm to humans and to aliens who inhabit earth. The target audience of this TV Show were young adults with ages comprised between 18 and 35. It was on air for seven seasons, the first broadcasted by CBS and the remaining by CW, and this allocation of network introduced some interesting changes.

As mentioned, this show had queer representation, which started in the 2<sup>nd</sup> season and lasted until the 7<sup>th</sup>, which allowed for these queer characters to be developed outside of the frequent one-episode appearances revolving around individual struggles with being part of the LGBTQIA+ community. The key character of this queer analysis is Alex Danvers, Kara's adoptive sister and works in the D.E.O., short for Department of Extranormal Operations. There, she prevents extraterrestrial threats, while this organization also concentrates most of the main cast and scenes. In the 1<sup>st</sup> season, when the show was still being broadcasted by CBS, Alex had a date with Maxwell Lord, a recurring enemy of Supergirl in the first season. In this date, both characters were trying to obtain information from one another. Nevertheless, that did not stop fans from shipping them, and although it seemed that this ship came out of nowhere, as initially Maxwell was supposed to be paired with another character, the surprise came from their couple-y scenes and not from the fact that maybe one of them was not heterosexual (Thomas,

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<sup>67</sup> By officially, I mean that as analyzed, even though they were heterosexual there was queer coding that led these characters to be read in different manners than those claimed by creators and actresses, in fact they admitted to playing up to these manners but never officially depicting them.

<sup>68</sup> By this I do not mean that shows with queer characters cannot be accused of queerbaiting but that in a show so progressive in its inclusivity and depictions there were still queer matter that led fans and critics to argue over.

2016).<sup>69</sup> Even though this is not out of the ordinary, as audiences only think to question a character's sexuality if it belongs to the queer spectrum, it is interesting because, even if it seemed to be a rushed pairing, fans were quick to ship them. Were they to be a queer couple, there would be arguments online against shipping them, since it would be a nonsensical coupling and fans would just be accused of pushing their agenda onto the show. However, after the show was reallocated to CW, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> season, Alex comes out as a lesbian and the queer representation starts increasing.<sup>70</sup>

Alex's realization that she might not be the default heterosexual woman is done through a conversation that she has with a detective called Maggie Sawyer, who is a lesbian and at the time of their conversation had a girlfriend. Throughout the 2<sup>nd</sup> season, Alex's arc revolves around coming out and understanding her sexuality and why she never enjoyed dating and being intimate with men. Although her coming out story follows the struggles that queer individuals experience, the surrounding characters, especially Kara, do not behave as if coming out is a minor issue that brings no social and political consequences. Furthermore, an innovative aspect of this story arc is that Alex is not a teenager or a college student, as she is an accomplished woman in her early 30s who is just now finding her sexuality. This is a rare occurrence as sexuality is often depicted as something to be explored throughout college or in the early years of a young adult's life. Therefore, this representation of a woman considering a different sexuality at an age in which she would be thinking about marriage is unusual, the reason being that sexuality is seen as stable and fixed in adulthood. In queer stereotypical representations, sexuality is to be experimented throughout an individual's teenage years or as a young adult. Although stereotypes can contain some basis of truth, they are mostly misconceptions or generalizations. In the case of the queer community, they are frequently only used to display harmful traits, such as transgender women being predators and pedophiles. Since these are the only representations of the queer community, they are classified as good or bad representations by fans, these classifications are linked to notions of happiness, affectivity and stereotypes. As in the next section I will approach the topic of good and

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<sup>69</sup> See <https://www.bustle.com/articles/133470-will-maxwell-lord-alex-danvers-get-together-on-supergirl-this-underdog-ship-could-go-the> for more information on *Supergirl*'s unexpected couple. Accessed 14 Apr. 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Which was not surprising as The CW was – according to GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) which monitors queer representation in media –, the network with the highest percentage of queer characters among the regulars, 15.4%.

bad representations, I am now going to focus on stereotypes and how they are used in depictions of queerness that do not challenge hegemonic discourse.

To fully understand these stereotypes and how Alex's character depiction subverted them, it is important to establish that she had a troubled childhood and teenage years. This occurred because her adoptive sister, Kara, was different due to her powers and alien identity. Thus Alex always felt that she had to strive for perfection to stand out. Yet, as she says in a conversation with Maggie, in the 5<sup>th</sup> episode of the 2<sup>nd</sup> season, even though she excelled at everything from education to her professional life, when it came to relationships she could never connect with a man, "I thought maybe that's just not the way that I was built. You know, it's not my thing." Throughout her "awakening" which is done with Maggie, she finally connects with another person and can be intimate with them without feeling awkward or out of place. Concurrently, while her sexual awakening occurred with Maggie, it was not with her that she ended up with. This was praised by fans, as it was relatable and represented the experiences of the queer community, "Because funnily enough, not every lesbian fancies every lesbian they meet and it's important for young LGBTQIA+ youths to understand that the person – if there is such a person – who makes you realize your sexuality isn't always the person you end up with." (West, 2016).<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, they become a couple very quickly, which plays into obligatory queer dating in which queer characters must instantly date one another. Throughout this season, although they become quite close to one another, especially since Maggie is helping Alex come to terms with her sexuality, their close relationship aims at them eventually becoming a couple. Not wanting to be the reason for her to come out, Maggie rejects Alex, as Maggie puts it, because relationships with those that just came out "never work out" (2<sup>nd</sup> season, 6<sup>th</sup> episode). This is rather strange for Maggie, as she had been very supportive of Alex's coming out and her progress throughout it. Eventually, she redeems herself by telling Alex that she was hesitant to be in a relationship due to the intensity of Alex's feelings, and halfway through the 2<sup>nd</sup> season they become a couple. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> season, with Floriana Lima, the actress playing Maggie Sawyer, leaving the show, writers had to come up with a way to wrap up their storyline for it to have a cohesive ending. This was achieved by playing into the average stereotypes regarding lesbian couples, in which Alex and Maggie argue over the fact that the former wants children,

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<sup>71</sup> See <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/supergirl-why-alex-danvers-authentic-coming-out-journey-means-so-much-lgbt-viewers-1591645> for more information on the importance of Alex Danver's as LGBTQIA+ representation. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023.



whereas the latter does not. Although it is perfectly understandable that a subject matter like this could represent a potential deal breaker for a couple, the way in which these two characters deal with the other's position is toxic, which left fans annoyed and led them to, if that is even possible, dismissed this couple as queer representation (Farnsworth, 2016).<sup>72</sup> The reason being that some fans did not want the only queer couple in the superhero TV Show to count as representation, since it was toxic and depicted queer people who did not want children in a negative manner to audiences (Keller, 2022).<sup>73</sup> In addition, their break-up scene portrays Maggie as selfish for not wanting to consider having children, thus not conforming to the hegemonic norm. Before going on to more stereotypes within the queer representation of the show that are often overused and employed to neutralize them or to allow them to better fit in with the hegemonic patriarchal discourse, I must mention that, as it is frequent with queer characters, there is never an actual queer community around them. This is interesting since these characters, as is the case of Alex, spend quite a few episodes trying to find their identity and what it entails. Even if they meet other characters that are part of the queer community, they appear when one is finding their identity but are never mentioned again. After the end of the journey into a new identity there never seems to be an establishment of an actual queer support group. Although Maggie brings Alex to an Alien dive bar which she describes as, "It's a safe haven. Place for off-world'ers to hang out, have a drink. Not feel so alone for a minute." which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the queer community, there is no other lesbian character around Alex besides those that she is dating. In queer representation, there is the frequent trope of the queer diaspora, which is accomplished by leaving rural towns and coming to the metropolis as a means to validate one's sexuality. This diaspora also allows individuals to find their family, which occurs in the form of more heterosexual communities with sprinkles of queerness here and there.

Returning to the stereotypes in the show, although they are a product of hegemonic discourse designed to maintain and uphold patriarchal status, they often represent the reality of minorities. Nevertheless, they are overplayed and feel derivative, as is the case of lesbian couples wanting to get married and adopt a child. This narrative

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<sup>72</sup> See <https://thequeerness.com/2016/12/28/want-strong-lgbtq-representation-supergirl-isnt-the-ship-youre-looking-for/> for more reasons as to why Sanvers is not "good" representation as well as interesting points made in the comment section of the article. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023.

<sup>73</sup> On a similar note, after the 1<sup>st</sup> season of *Wednesday* (2023-) aired, creator Tim Burton was accused of being racist after using black actors to play the villains of the show and for having black undertones. See <https://nypost.com/2022/11/30/tim-burtons-wednesday-called-racist-for-casting-black-actors-as-bullies/> for more information on this controversy. Accessed 30 Apr. 2023.

maintains views over motherhood that are associated to the reproductive performance of the female body. In the case of *Supergirl*, both lesbian couples deal with the theme of wanting to raise a child, first with Alex and Maggie, and then with Alex and Kelly. Still, since both couples have Alex in common, it is cohesive for there to be a follow up to what broke up Alex's relationship with Maggie. Hence, in the last season Alex and Kelly adopt a young child named Emma. Nonetheless, this is a frequent trope seen in lesbian couples that ensures the continuation of reproduction, motherhood, and female propensity to want a baby, thus maintaining patriarchal society as they are two working women with a baby contributing to the future generation. They also get married in the last episode of the final season, again reinforcing heteronormative values onto the queer experience of sociability. I must also add that when it comes to queer representation, the depictions of queer individuals show them as good citizens who abide by the law and have the freedom to explore their sexuality, which is known as homonationalism.<sup>74</sup> This narrative is used to set apart developed countries from others in which there are no queer rights. In the show, queer individuals who are either part of the main cast or regulars, all worked in law enforcement, with Kelly being an ex-army lieutenant and Nia Nal being a superhero, their representations are in direct line with the representations of queer individuals as part of a country's working force.

Because these representations often use stereotypes and are less depicted than heterosexual couples, they are more prone to be analyzed and judged by fans, especially those who are a part of the queer community that has been baited many times, as seen in *Rizzoli & Isles* or in *The 100* (2014-2020), by having one of the characters die after a queer romantic pairing is established. Therefore, these representations will be deemed good and acceptable by audiences, or be seen as bad and problematic when perpetuating toxic and harmful views.

## 5.2 Good and Bad Representation

This brings me to the notion of good and bad queer representation and how it follows specific patterns that uphold normative values, these allow the depiction of queer characters without alienating heterosexual and queer audiences. While doing so is

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<sup>74</sup> Within the USA, there is the dissemination of a progressive ideology through queerness that allegedly sets it apart from other countries which are then portrayed as narrow-minded, thus legitimizing attacks against them (Puar, 2007).

complex, especially on TV, because fans are vocal about the responsibility that producers have in presenting “good” representations and of moving away from prejudicial stereotypes, communication with producers as the show is ongoing, allows the narrative to be altered if audiences are not receptive to what is being represented. Simultaneously, with online forums and fan-based websites there is always the case of trolls which hinder the communication between these two, sometimes antagonistic, stances over the course of a specific narrative, leading these relationships to be strained.<sup>75</sup> Trolls focus on using humor to target specific groups and identities in an unpleasant manner, they desire to provoke an answer from the attacked group and to create chaos. Being fans very attached to TV Shows and other pieces of media, they are the perfect target as they are likely to retaliate. (Scott, 2018, p.145) Therefore, while representation can be negotiated it is hard, as fans and producers must regulate between trolling and constructive criticism to improve communication on both sides. Thus, when *Supergirl* was airing its 3<sup>rd</sup> season, concerns were raised over killing off one of the queer characters (Isaac, 2017)<sup>76</sup>, most specifically Maggie Sawyer, after it was known that the actress Floriana Lima, would be leaving at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> season. Although no death occurred, with the whole debacle of Lexa, from *The 100* dying after fans had been promised fair treatment of queer characters, it was understandable why fans were wary of the possible ending that could be given to Maggie.<sup>77</sup> As it would be another example of the “bury your gays” trope which is deemed harmful as it depicts queer characters as unable to have a promising future for queer youths to look up to.<sup>78</sup>

When discussing representation, it is rather difficult to even begin to establish what is “good” and what is “bad” representation as different criteria would be used depending on the cultural background of audiences, as well as their expectations regarding the representation of the queer community in media. Concurrently, queerness is utopia if one is to see it as the unattainable “other”. Therefore, when it becomes a part of mainstream media, it is assimilated and consequently tailored for mainstream audiences to enjoy without having to confront homophobic views and without it

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<sup>75</sup> No need to look further than BBC’s *Sherlock* (2010-2017) in which the relationship between fans and creator was hostile since fans theories were dismissed as Steven Moffat felt that he was the sole creator and writer of *Sherlock* thus being the only one allowed to decide the fate of the character and storylines.

<sup>76</sup> See <https://screenrant.com/supergirl-season-3-maggie-sawyer-fate/> for more information on Maggie’s fate and reasons as to why the producer had to confirm that she would not die. Accessed 4 May 2023.

<sup>77</sup> *The 100* was also a show broadcasted by CW, a network notorious for either queerbaiting and for poor treatment of queer characters.

<sup>78</sup> Popular while the Hays Code was enforced, it was the only way that allowed for queer characters to be represented, however, their fates were either death, incarceration or isolation.

challenging societal norms. Therefore, queer representation even if deemed “good” can never fully constitute itself as “queer” if it has been assimilated, nor can it ever be deemed as authentic if it is tailored for mainstream audiences. At the same time, there is a debate on whether “bad” representations, for instance queer coded villains such as Raoul Silva in *Skyfall* (2012), are preferred over no queer representation at all. While “bad” representations have been a constant throughout the years, “good” representations, on the hand, are much scarcer. For instance, the first Disney animated movie to feature queer representation was *Zootopia* (2016) and it was such a subtle reference that only by paying close attention to the ending credits would one notice that there was a lesbian couple in the movie. This makes it so that if one is to look only at the representations that are not deemed “bad”, the list would be rather small and the most popular producer of animated movies for children, would have only had queer representation ten years before the end of the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In *Supergirl*, queer representation in the show is achieved in the 2<sup>nd</sup> season through a lesbian character who is part of the main cast, Alex Danvers. By the 4<sup>th</sup> season there is a transgender character, Nia Nal, played by transgender actress, Nicole Maines. Still in this season Kelly Olsen, a lesbian woman is also introduced and later in the 5<sup>th</sup> season, after she becomes Alex’s romantic interest, is upgraded to a series regular. All these characters, including those used in accusations of queerbaiting, play a role in lesbian stereotyping of female sexuality for the male-gaze. Even though the show was praised for its queer representation, the lesbian characters, although working in law enforcement, Alex working as an officer for a governmental department and Kelly being an ex-army lieutenant that now works with children, they are still quite feminine. Despite mostly wearing training and pantsuits neither can be considered the depiction of a Butch lesbian, which as mentioned is a rare depiction of lesbianism that has often been deemed as predatory and aggressive on the media, this rarity is also a consequence of it not being appealing to the male gaze.<sup>79</sup> Thus, despite being progressive, the show’s representation follows the exhaustive portrayal of lesbians in media, which does not subvert the stereotypes surrounding lesbianism. Compared to *Rizzoli & Isles*, *Supergirl* does not depict women in law enforcement as breaking from all associations with femininity, nevertheless, it would have been groundbreaking to see a couple in which both women are butch.

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<sup>79</sup> In the last season full body suits that correspond to what their superhero persona embodies.

The relationship between Alex and Maggie was the first queer couple and is sometimes used as a parallel to the relationship of Lena and Kara, however the former is romantic, and the latter is not. At the time in which episodes relating to Maggie and Alex, frequently referred to as Sanvers, were aired, they were the only representation and thus the most prominent.<sup>80</sup> Ironically, while they are established as queer representation, media was also quite focused on the queerbaiting accusations and the possible romantic relationship between Lena and Kara. Nevertheless, the relationship that was depicted between them – Maggie and Alex – however brief, was enough to be received with mixed feelings, as some felt that the relationship between them was not as groundbreaking as certain media outlets were making it to be (Kylie, 2017).<sup>81</sup> On the other side, some praised the show's writers for allowing a character that was in her 30s to come out and explore her sexuality (Tang, 2017).<sup>82</sup> Concurrently, this exploration of her sexuality was exactly what was disliked by certain fans, as they felt that every LGBTQIA+ character had to have a coming out story to be able to fit into the queer narrative of finding sexual freedom to validate their identity. Furthermore, even though fans argue for queer representation free of stereotypes and prejudices, when advocating for it they rely on the “happily ever after” associated with heterosexual romantic couples, which culminates in getting married and having children, this occurs with Alex and Kelly in the season finale. As McDermott writes, “Happiness is fundamental for fans in their conceptions of positive or negative representation. It is also the foundation for queerbaiting critique when the representation does not meet the expectations of audiences, as in the case of *The 100*.” (2020, p.6). Therefore, if one is to apply the criteria of them both having happy endings, getting married and adopting a child, Kelly and Alex would then serve as an example of a “good representation” of queerness. Nonetheless, this follows the pattern of lesbian representations in media, from *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-present) with the storyline of Arizona Robbins adopting the child of the woman she is in a romantic relationship with, to the TV Show *The Fosters* (2013-2018) whose premise revolved around a married lesbian couple and their adopted children, these depictions are frequent and follow the same heteronormative notions of good endings, monogamous marriage and children, thus

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<sup>80</sup> Ship name given by the fandom, which is created by joining their last names, Maggie Sawyer + Alex Danvers = Sanvers.

<sup>81</sup> See <https://www.thefandomentals.com/supergirl-sanvers-analysis/> for more details on how CW failed to develop Alex and Maggie's relationship. Accessed 1 May 2023.

<sup>82</sup> See <https://www.elle.com/culture/movies-tv/a43186/supergirl-sanvers-lgbtq-fandom/> for a more detailed article on the importance of a relationship like Alex and Maggie's for the queer community. Accessed 1 May 2023.

not subverting any hegemonic discourse. In these couples, interraciality is more of a subversive occurrence in their relationship than is the fact that they are both women, especially since they fit into the male gaze of lesbian couples. Moreover, they represent the well-adjusted, well-off, law-abiding citizens which support their country and continue the generation by raising children. At the same time, since they are two women, there is not as much prejudice of two queer characters raising a child together as there would have been if they were two very masculine gay men, as femininity continues to be associated with motherhood, hence, making it so that in gay couples, such as Mitch and Cam from *Modern Family* (2009-2020) at least one is more feminine presenting.

In addition, to the lesbian relationships depicted on-screen from the 2<sup>nd</sup> season onwards, there is a transgender character, Nia Nal, and, as with all the characters of this show, she too eventually becomes a superhero, making her the first transgender superhero on TV. Although she only appears in the 4<sup>th</sup> season, her development does not feel contrived, nor it is done in a manner that uses queer characters to fill in representation quotas. Even though in the past, TV Series depicted one or two queer characters per season, they had little influence in the debate over “good” or “bad” representation since as quickly they came in, they left. Besides this, even if the episode was centered on them, it was done in a superficial manner that addressed their struggles as queer individuals which resulted from their own experiences and not from society. In Nia Nal’s case while it is addressed that she is transgender there is not an extraordinarily focus on this, casual viewers could even forget it since it is not brought up as other character traits such as her finding out that she has powers and coming to terms with becoming a superhero. Furthermore, when it comes to her depiction as a transgender woman, it was interesting that the show centered her superpowers around gender, only the women of her family can inherit the superpowers, leading to a conversation in episode 11 of the 4<sup>th</sup> season in which her sister tells her, “Right. How did you, of all people, get the powers? They're supposed to be passed down from mother to daughter. So how did someone like you get them? You're not even a real woman.” This transphobic comment was not brushed aside and in the final season Nia did not forgive her sister but agreed to give her a second chance. This storyline also implies that even though she was assigned male at birth, she is not any less of a woman than her sister is and just as illegible to have superpowers as someone who was assigned female at birth.

Ultimately, the show, produced by a network so frequently accused of queerbaiting and of delivering plastic representation, was quite progressive in its

depictions of queer characters.<sup>83</sup> From interracial lesbian couples to a transgender character who had a love life and was allowed to have a storyline that did not revolve around her gender and sexuality. At the same time, it should be mentioned that the representation of a transgender character brought great publicity to the show with many articles in popular newspapers from *The New York Times* to *The Independent*.<sup>84</sup> This, however, did not stop the accusations of queerbaiting that were occurring in *Supergirl* as well as other CW shows such as *Riverdale* (2017-2023) and *Supernatural* (2005-2020).

### 5.3 Queerbaiting and centrality

After the introduction of Lena Luthor, the show received complaints from fans of queerbaiting practices between the two main characters. This character was introduced in the 2<sup>nd</sup> season as the sister of Lex Luthor, a major antagonist within the Superman universe. *Supergirl* is based on DC's Superhero Universe created by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, and although the storyline deviates slightly from the comics, it stays mostly true to the established lore in the DC universe. Although the intrinsic differences between the story in the comics and its TV Show adaptation are not to be approached here, it is important to understand that networks, producers and actors, have limited creative liberty in these adaptations. However, other characters like Alex Danvers and Nia Nal are queer on the show but not in the comics.<sup>85</sup> Hence, my point is that even though certain characters are heterosexual in the original work, in the show, a decision was made to change their sexuality. Therefore, they can change the sexuality of certain characters but not of the main character, this is interesting as it explains how heterosexuality is preferred over queerness. Heterosexuality and the subsequent romantic relationships are one of the central leading selling parts of a TV Series. Nevertheless, with Kara Danvers and Lena Luthor that did not occur even though their position would have meant groundbreaking

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<sup>83</sup> Plastic representation is used to describe depictions on screen whose intent is not on delivering "authentic" representations but instead using the stereotypes associated with underrepresented minorities to display an image of progressiveness. In addition, since there is very little to no representation of said minorities, it is not complicated to lure viewers with promises of depictions that ultimately are just derivative versions of tropes seen frequently on screen.

<sup>84</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/12/arts/television/nicole-maines-supergirl-transgender-interview.html> and <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/supergirl-first-transgender-superhero-nicole-maines-a8458531.html> for information on the first transgender superhero. Accessed 6 May 2023.

<sup>85</sup> These characters are also superheroes since by the season finale, the main cast becomes some type of hero/sentinel and in the end the main cast create The Super friends which is composed of all of the characters of the main cast as superheroes or vigilantes as part of a major group.

representation as very few leads of TV Series are established as queer.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, their relationship mirrors not just that of Lois and Clark but also Lex and Clark, from the show *Smallville* (2001-2011) broadcasted by Warner Bros. and CW. As they were friends who kept secrets from each other relating to Clark's superhero persona, however their relationship was sans homoerotic tension as opposed to Kara and Lena's.

Additionally, since the main premise of this show revolves around a superhero it must be mentioned how superheroes frequently work as metaphors for queerness and the feeling of being the "other". In the *X-Men* Marvel franchise, the premise revolves around individuals whose differences, mutant abilities, which frighten human beings, do not allow them to have a free "out" life leading them to seek refuge in specific communities (Lecker, 2007, p.680). This "otherness" occurs since they are forced to mask their abilities and superhero persona depending on the group setting that they are in. In the Arrowverse in which the show is set in, Kara is a superhero whose story mostly resembles that of a queer individual.<sup>87</sup> Out of the Arrowverse superheroes, she is the only hero that is forced to "come out" but that at the same time was already born with her superpowers.<sup>88</sup> Whereas, the Flash, for instance, was a victim of a lab experiment and his story deals with the realization of how to best use his powers, Kara, on the other hand, already knew that she had superpowers and in the act of saving an airplane, which had her sister in it, from crashing, "outed" herself to the whole world. She then spends the first season hiding her identity whilst still trying to save humans. In the second season she tells Winn, a good friend of hers, that she has a secret she has been hiding from him, which culminates in him asking her if she is a lesbian to which she answers, "I'm not gay! I'm...I'm her! The woman who saved the plane."<sup>89</sup> Simultaneously, due to her secret, she has a few personas that she embodies depending on who she finds herself with, from Kara Danvers to Supergirl there are different circumstances that force her to be either a journalist or a superhero. As Kara Danvers the journalist, she is inconspicuous due to her plain clothes and more submissive behavior, whereas as Supergirl she wears the bright red and blue

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<sup>86</sup> At the time of this work some CW superhero TV shows have female leads which constitute as queer representation such *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-2022) and *Batwoman* (2019-2022).

<sup>87</sup> Airing primarily in the CW and concentrating in various TV Series whose storylines are interconnected thus allowing crossovers among them, the Arrowverse is an American superhero franchise based on multiple DC comics superheroes.

<sup>88</sup> By "only hero" I am specifically only referring to the leading characters of each show set in the Arrowverse, not to the entire assemblage of the arrow universe superheroes.

<sup>89</sup> I must add that after Winn assumes that what Kara is a Lesbian, he states, "Oh, Kara, that's why you are not into me. This is... this is great news." This is an even bigger assumption on his part in which he reasons that Kara not being "into" him is due to her sexuality, which means that there had to be a reasonable explanation for Kara not being interested in him besides her just not being interested or attracted to him.



suit and assumes the dominant stance of straight back, legs spread and hands resting on hips.

Thus, as the focus of this work has been queerbaiting, I must mention the relationship between Kara and Lena which is filled with the different personas that Kara must embody. At first Lena is allowed into the world of Kara Danvers, the journalist, and Supergirl, the hero, then by the 4<sup>th</sup> season she also allowed into the world of Kara Zor-El.<sup>90</sup> Thus, their relationship shows how these personas represent otherness and how individuals, whose identity does not conform to the norm, must disguise themselves in order to be accepted.<sup>91</sup>

In the 1<sup>st</sup> season we see Kara hiding her identity from her close friends, whereas in the remaining seasons she hides herself from someone that quickly becomes her best friend but is not privy on her secret, thus making her feel guilty because she must hide her identity from Lena. This relationship dynamic leads to many emotionally charged moments between them, specially from the 5<sup>th</sup> season onwards. Even so, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> season, when Lena Luthor is first introduced, some moments were already being read as possible indicators that their relationship was to be perceived as a potential romance. In the 11<sup>th</sup> episode of the 2<sup>nd</sup> season, Supergirl saves Lena and tells her that she had been sent by Kara Danvers. In the next episode, Lena fills Kara's office with flowers and then says the very iconic line, "Supergirl may be a superhero but *you* [emphasis added] Kara Danvers are my real hero." This line is a popular example used when fans want to defend themselves from those who accuse them of reading too much into the text, the reason being that it was a line also said by Iris West, the love interest of Barry Allen in the TV Show *Flash* (2014-2023). Making this scene a direct parallel between the main relationship of the *Flash* which eventually becomes romantic and the main relationship of Supergirl which does not go any further than friendship. Furthermore, in the episode in which she is saved by Supergirl, she is caught in a bridal position which is derivative of the popular scene of Superman catching Lois Lane, making this scene a parallel between Superman and Lois Lane (a romantic couple) and Supergirl and Lena Luthor (best friends). Besides this, from wardrobe choices of Lena wearing blue and Kara red

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<sup>90</sup> Kara Zor-El would be the middle ground between Kara Danvers and Supergirl.

<sup>91</sup> In the case of Kara and Lena due to the nature of their relationship and the development of their arcs over the seasons it is clear that Kara's hesitance over disclosing to Lena her identity is due to the fact that throughout the seasons Lena and her corporation see aliens as dangerous. In the early seasons she even develops a device that allows humans to recognize aliens that are masking their identity, by the later seasons their relationship is already close to the point that Kara fears that Lena would want to no longer be her friend due to this secret.

which are the colors used by Lois and Clark respectively, to dialogues that are exactly the same used by romantic couples within the Arrowverse, there are parallels that can be traced between them and different romantic couples, as Chapman argues, “By having Lena and Kara have these pseudo-romantic moments and similar heterosexual dialogue utilized within other CW shows it is no wonder that fans have been decoding their exchanges to be romantic and believing that they will become a couple.” (2022, p.10).

On the matters of centrality, CW is the leading network when it comes to racial diversity and queer representation so much so that in the 1<sup>st</sup> season, while the show was still broadcasted by CBS, Cath Grant, the director at the editing company in which Kara works stated, “All four you standing there doing nothing, you look like the attractive, yet non-threatening, racially diverse cast of a CW show.” In addition, CW has also been leading the entertainment network in queer representation and by the final season there were three queer characters among the main cast one of which was a transgender superhero. However, none of these characters are the leads. In fact, looking at the array of characters that CW has, in their superhero universe, out of five TV Series, only in one is the queer character also the main character. Therefore, although the representation has been improving it is still not frequent to see main characters as queer. Even though in the other shows such as *Arrow* (2012-2020) and *Flash* (2014-2023) very clear love interests are set early on the show, in *Supergirl*, throughout the seasons there is no concluding romantic relationship for Kara, whereas Oliver West and Barry Allen, respectively, even eventually get married and have children, with Kara there is an array of love interests that lack romantic and emotional depth.

In shows accused of queerbaiting this lack of established “soulmate” relationship is a common denominator, from *Xena: The Warrior Princess* to *Supernatural*, there are an array of shows with same-sex leading pairs that do not establish a final endgame couple that emotionally engages the fans. While those shows use the popular “will they/won’t they” to maintain the suspense, in shows accused of queerbaiting there is no intent on depicting the subtle “will they”, throughout the seasons there are various opposite sex-love interests that leave as quickly as they appear. Just as was the case with *Rizzoli & Isles*, in *Supergirl* both characters end the season single with no prospects of a romantic relationship with the opposite sex. Concurrently, while Lena and Kara developed a very close relationship with one another, throughout the seasons, other relationships that each one of them establishes with other female characters did not prompt these accusations. The argument that might be raised is that if in those other relationships there is no queer

coding and deliberate queer subtext, of course there would be no accusations of queerbaiting. This is correct, as has been proven throughout this work there are deliberate techniques from color schemes to background music that indicate whether the intent is to queer code. Nevertheless, what is then the intent in queer coding only the main characters? If there is no intent on depicting it, why is there so much focus on the characters that are the face of the TV Series? McDermott argues that fans focus on the main characters as centers of queerness due to “the chemistry, in the potential that comes from build-up that is never actualized, and they want this centralized in the narrative” (McDermott, 2020, p.129). Being at the center of the narrative also implies that there are more scenes and screen time to analyze and extrapolate meaning from, nevertheless, in certain queerbaiting accusations, as is the case of *Supergirl* the parallels between romantic couples, are enough to showcase the intent in alluding to possible representation. Furthermore, occurring in both cases analyzed in this work, when it comes to pairings of women, skinship alone is enough to attract more viewers without challenging gender roles and behaviors, especially in the case of Kara and Lena which are feminine.<sup>92</sup>

As is frequent with queerbaiting, the scenes are encrypted in a manner that brings joy to queer audiences, by using queer cryptography when analyzing specific scenes to unmask the “true” intent behind the more superficial meaning of a scene. McDermott writes that when queer audiences are presented with the possibility of decoding scenes, they feel superior to the average viewer as they can analyze the real depictions/intentions of scenes, “There is a privileging of primary experience for the understanding, and thus, representation of queerness amongst many fans. This primary experience for them can only come from an identity that inevitably corresponds to an authentic queer experience.” (2020, p.78). Nevertheless, since queer readings are so poorly received by producers, it is not possible to argue that fans come up with them just to feel a sense of elation and superiority if they are so frequently attacked, ridiculed or dismissed for them. In addition, whatever is that they are interpreting is as valid as any other interpretation, since after a piece of media is out there, it is out of the hands of the producers to control their reception. Even actors can recognize the theories that fans defend, and as shown, romantic parallels and gender performance indicate the deliberate queer coding, Katie McGrath the actress

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<sup>92</sup> In the 5<sup>th</sup> season after she learns Kara’s secret, Lena starts wearing three-piece suits which is her way of showing that she is in power, these suits also represent her body armor against all the characters that made her feel like a fool. In the 6<sup>th</sup> season Lena turns into a witch thus her outfits, hairstyle and make-up change accordingly to this change.

that plays Lena Luthor stated that after watching the scenes she realized where the Supercorp fans were coming from, since she could read the changes that go beyond acting, such as dialogue and editing choices (Mitovich, 2017).<sup>93</sup>

## 5.4 Producer and audience relationships

Even though the show was praised for its accurate depictions of queer matters such as Alex's coming out story, eventual queer relationships and even adding a transgender character, it did not stop the complaints regarding the treatment that was given to the Supercorp ship. Although the expectations were not reaching the levels of the JohnLock community – in which fans created support groups to cope with the ship not becoming canon – there was enough commotion online that showed the fans' expectations regarding the consummation of this pairing (Damante, 2021).<sup>94</sup> Different cultural backgrounds lead scenes to be read in a variety of ways, however, even if these readings differ from viewer to viewer, it is undeniable that Kara and Lena share a very deep bond. As established in the previous chapter, whenever two characters of the same sex share the screen, there is a tendency for producers and creators to queer code them, particularly if they are the lead characters, in order to attract queer audiences. Nevertheless, in the case of *Supergirl* there was already queer representation of the same manner, as in there was already a lesbian couple, and the parallels between them and Lena and Kara are evident even if only subconsciously acknowledged.<sup>95</sup>

In producer/audience relationships, there is the matter of queer fan labor, exploitation of queerness and textual poaching to better accommodate the theories of fans. Particularly, on the matter of fan labor and queerness, it is important to establish that even though fan labor is rather important as it allows shows to have free marketing in social media platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr, which allows fans to connect with what is trending now, frequently through hashtags. In the case of the queer community, throughout the years and even in the early years of the internet, a connection to the web allowed relationships to be established with members of the same community. In addition, while queer content on screen was too censored or not even depicted, the only way to find

<sup>93</sup> <https://tvline.com/2017/04/11/supergirl-season-2-interview-katie-mcgrath-lena-luthor/> Accessed 24 Apr. 2023.

<sup>94</sup> See <https://www.advocate.com/commentary/2021/11/10/supergirls-series-finale-could-have-been-gayer#toggle-gdpr> for more reasons as to why *Supergirl*'s finale was disappointing. Accessed 24 Apr. 2023.

<sup>95</sup> By this I am concretely referring to the subliminal messages that occur whenever there are parallels between romantic and non-romantic couples.

possible representation was online, through textual poaching as seen in *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2011), through fanfiction websites and online forums. This shows that throughout the years the queer community adapted itself in order to, since there was no available representation, create their own, or at least to transform the existing heteronormative content. Therefore, using social media platforms and forums to distribute queer content and find peers is very common within the history of the queer community. Nonetheless, albeit queer audiences are used to resort to online content to find representation, in regard to TV Shows, it becomes problematic whenever trolls and fan wars start online. Besides these trolls, it is even more problematic if it is the own network and creators attacking the fans, by making them question their interpretations when they purposely depicted those scenes in an ambiguous manner (Chapman, 2022, p.5). Therefore, due to the wide variety of possible receptors, when a text is publicized, it is difficult to fully control the different interpretations that will be attributed to those texts. Once a piece of media is out there, it is in the hands of whoever receives it, to appropriate it and modify it to their wishes (Anselmo, 2018, p.102).

In the case of *Supergirl*, shortly after Lena was introduced there were entries on fanfiction websites such as Fanfiction.net, YouTube videos and Tumblr edits, these mostly consisted of textual poaching and editing that confers visual gratification to those that wish to see them together.<sup>96</sup> As Anselmo writes,

Digging for latent queer narratives, fleshing out spectral forms of nonnormative representation through Tumblr blog posts, videos, and GIF sets, is labor—an unrecognized type of reception labor that queer viewers have been tasked with by virtue of existing within heteronormative societies. However, queer fan labor also pivots around traditional structures of power as fans jockey for official recognition and authorial status historically denied to young women and queer viewers. (2018, p.101)

In *Supergirl*, both actresses have a pleasant relationship with the public, especially Katie McGrath as she had previously portrayed queer characters and was even

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<sup>96</sup> Although these edits and transformational works are often created to be shared with other fans, it sometimes occurs that their works are shared with celebrities, most often through twitter, leading their authors to be mocked. Among these transformational works are fanarts, when promoting *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014) actors Michael Fassbender and James McAvoy in *The Graham Norton Show* (2007-), after reacting to fanart made of them by the fans, were asked to reenact a prompt given by a fan which was then transformed into a drawing of them together.

supportive of the Supercorp ship. The same could not be said for another cast member, Jeremy Jordan which in an interview for MTV sang the following, “(...) only friends. They [Lena and Kara] are only friends! They are not going to get together!” This led to complaints from the fans, which prompted Jordan to defend himself on Twitter from the accusations of dismissing the views of the audiences and interpretations.<sup>97</sup> Besides this infamous moment, screenwriter J. Holtham wrote in a now deleted tweet, “On the show, Lena and Kara are not lovers. If you feel like the show is promising that and not delivering on it, that is not our intention.” (Laguerre-Lewis, 2021)<sup>98</sup> This depicts fans who see them as a couple as delusional and gaslights them into questioning their interpretations on what is being depicted on screen (Anselmo, 2018, p.87). However, moments between Kara/Lena and other established romantic couples within the Arrowverse such as Oliver/Felicity and Barry/Iris, are used to argue that their decisions to use specific lines and songs associated with romantic love is intentional.

Furthermore, if the main text is deliberately ambiguous, audiences will read scenes and fill in these gaps in different manners. Hence, Lena’s longing gaze towards Kara in a scene that mirrors that of Alex and Maggie, or Alex, after Kara tries to fix her friendship with Lena, compares their relationship to that of her own romantic relationship with Maggie, is bound to create expectations of similar romantic fates for the leads. These ambiguities are filled with the experiences that one has in real life, nevertheless since they are direct parallels of other couples, transporting the interpretations of said couples onto Kara and Lena is just as plausible as the original interpretations are. Many years ago, the relationships between the creators and its audience were only reserved to conventions and interviews in talk shows, and thus were tailored and scripted to fit the interests of the network. Nowadays, the availability of the internet allows for every crew member to be able to communicate with the audience. In a now deleted tweet by Caitlin Parrish, a *Supergirl* screenwriter, there was the attachment of a picture showing the script for the 17<sup>th</sup> episode of the 3<sup>rd</sup> season, in which there was the following line, “Lena smiles as Supercorp shippers everywhere squeal.” This clearly shows that not only is the show aware of the existence of the ship but also directly plays into to it for laughs, which in turn upsets the queer community as their interpretations are seen as comedic but

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<sup>97</sup> “The CW’s ‘Supergirl’ Cast Musical Recap of Season 2 | Comic-Con 2017 | MTV.” YouTube, MTV, 2017.

<sup>98</sup> <https://rhodycigar.com/2021/11/12/queerbaiting-in-supergirl-more-than-just-missed-chances/> Accessed 27 Apr. 2023.

ridiculous since they are not real. This leads them to voice their opinions in social media platforms which are available to creators, actors, other members of the audience and of course trolls. In a myriad of comments, it can be difficult to filter through the thousands of entries with harmful and depreciative messages to finally reach a comment that contains some constructive criticism.

Consequently, while different expectations over the course of a TV Series are not uncommon, as for instance the case of *The X-Files* (1993-2018), in which the creator, Chris Carter, did not originally plan for the relationship between the leads to be romantic (Lovece, 1996, p.3-4). In the wake of fans who enjoyed their relationship and wanted them to become a couple, the TV Show actualized their relationship on-screen as a romantic one after years of sexual tension. In the case of the queer community, these expectations are often not met, and even more damaging is that they are called “delusional” for reading too much into the text even though they are just using their background and experiences to fill in the gaps that are intentionally left by producers. These interactions lead to rifts which estrange more and more the relationships between producers and audiences. Adding to this those that troll for the sake of trolling, it is bound for these relationships to be hostile and sometimes even harmful for both sides. As it is difficult for producers to give over full control over their creations, it is difficult for fans as they feel that they have the right to interpret and come up with their own theories. This symbiotic relationship is rather complex since it plays directly into negotiations of power in which both sides try to claim ownership over a piece of media (Scott, 2018, p.144). Yet, in the case of queerbaiting, as producers have the possibility of realizing couples on screen but choose not to, it leads to producorial trolling, in which fans can be trolled through a variety of ways, from promotional photos to official social media accounts sharing fan-made works of the ship at the center of the queerbaiting accusations. As Scott argues,

When fans are framed as trolls, it is because they have become too aggressive in their affective claims to textual ownership, manifested in actively attempting to sway or collectively criticize particular representational choices. Producers are situated as trolls when they, for either industrial or personal reasons, insert themselves into fan communities of practices or actively attempt to contain particular forms of fannish reading. (2018, p.146)

Simultaneously, since these marketing techniques are a product of a variety of departments it could occur that a network ordered this without it coming directly from the producer.<sup>99</sup> Nonetheless, these are all extra-textual and when it comes to the issue at hand, it does not develop from them but from the original text. Originally Lena Luthor was only meant to appear in a few episodes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> season, with the purpose of establishing her as a character within the Supergirl Universe since she plays an important role within the comics. However, after producers realized the great potential that Katie McGrath could bring to the show, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> season her contract was extended to participate as a series regular.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, as they eventually realized that the relationship between Lena and Kara was increasing the viewership, in the 100<sup>th</sup> episode – an episode that is often focused on celebrating certain characters and/or specific plot points that are inherent to the show – the premise revolved around all the different scenarios in which Kara could have told Lena that she was Supergirl but did not. Up until this season Kara had been struggling with lying to her best friend, nevertheless the show made it clear that their relationship was a key aspect that defined the show by making the 100<sup>th</sup> episode all about Supercorp. This moment paired with others such as Lena saying that Kara's betrayal broke her heart and comparing romantic relationships to the relationship of Kara and Lena goes much further than just on-screen tension and chemistry between the actresses. However, acknowledging that these parallels are deliberately created by the show, to play into the different interpretations and expectations of viewers only to then tell them that they are reading too much into the text, is rather upsetting and leads communities to want to break all ties with the creator and assume textual ownership by poaching it, as Katie McGrath stated in an interview,

I feel like what we do is art, and it's the same as painting a picture and one person sees a sunflower and another sees a kettle: that's the point of art, is that you take away from it what you see," McGrath said. "That's their response to the show and that's what's important to them. If anything, the fact that we can create such passion in people is amazing. When I meet people who ship Lena and Kara, I'm not going to, and I know nobody else on the show is going to, deny them that. We make the show,

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<sup>99</sup> Recently in a fan convention, Misha Collins, after accidentally coming out as bisexual, stated that he was told by Warner Bros. if he could possibly stay that way since popular magazine articles of him being Bi were being written and it was a good way to promote their show.

<sup>100</sup> Interestingly, in *Supernatural*, a show produced by the CW that was also accused of queerbaiting, the same occurred with actor Misha Collins when he played Castiel since, at first, he too was supposed to only be a guest star but after a positive reception he was upgraded to a series regular in the 5<sup>th</sup> season.



and the viewers watch it, and it becomes their show once they watch it.... Once we finish a day, for me, it's no longer mine; it's theirs. (Burlingame, 2017)<sup>101</sup>

While queer fans can see queerly, they are also able to see straight since they are used to mask their queerness to be able to pass as straight (McDermott, 2020, p.78). Concurrently, it is difficult to negotiate what is “authentic” queer representation, if only members of the queer community can “see queerly”, then heterosexual writers cannot deliver authentic queer representation because they are not attuned to the intricacies and symbolic codes of the queer community. Furthermore, this view plays into the heterosexual vs homosexual binarism which does not consider, for instance, those that are part of the asexual and aromantic spectrum. Besides this, there is also the often defense of “straight people can also see the chemistry between them” which deters the “seeing queerly”, if members outside of the queer community can also recognize and interpret the codes. Thus, making the relationships between creators and audiences tense since some advocate for representation at all costs, whether written by heterosexual cisgender white men or by a member of the community that is being depicted on screen, whereas others prefer only “authentic good” representation to see the light by having only writers and creators of said community. Although these are progressive changes to be done in media creation, regulation and authenticity are as utopic as queerness is. In addition, it is important to analyze if diversity would truly impact the outcome of queer representations, since networks still impose heavy regulations on the content that is allowed and is not allowed to be broadcasted, as of May 2023, more than 18 queer shows have been cancelled, with HBO Max and Netflix each cancelling 3 queer TV Series.<sup>102</sup>

On an end note, the show’s queer representation was praised by fans and critics as dealing with the discovery of a different sexuality at a later stage in life, thus breaking from the “Bicurious until Graduation” trope and by depicting the first ever transgender superhero on TV. Nevertheless, the depicted relationships do not deviate from the frequent stereotypes associated with the queer community. Therefore, although it does deal with the coming-out in a manner that allows Alex to voice her struggles it still follows the frequent depictions of finding sexual identity and of being validated by the queer community. Adding to this the many accusations of queerbaiting techniques

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<sup>101</sup> <https://comicbook.com/dc/news/katie-mcgrath-on-how-supergirl-courts-controversy-and-the-superc/>  
Accessed 7 May 2023.

<sup>102</sup> Consult <https://www.out.com/gay-tv-shows/lgbtq-shows-cancelled> for more information on LGBTQ+ shows that got canceled in 2023. Accessed 20 Jun. 2023.

surrounding the show, which were disregarded as unfounded as their intention was not to depict their relationship in that matter. Yet, as this analysis exposes, it was deliberate, thus clarifying that even though CW intended to offer “good” queer representation it did so while employing harmful techniques that alienate the queer community.

## 6. Conclusion

Throughout this work the primary objective was analyzing TV Shows which were criticized of delivering plastic representation as there is no intent in depicting queer characters and relationships. These are inherently connected to what audiences expect of the relationships on-screen, nevertheless it also originates from the homoerotic tension and queer coding between the leads. Although intimate platonic relationships between women are less frequent as those between men, in the shows analyzed here the relationships cater to the marketing techniques seen in the 90s known as “pink dollar”. In media, these techniques are called “queerbaiting” whose main objective is attracting the queer community by leading them to believe in possible on-screen representation without ever actually delivering it. However, networks must regulate between what is accepted by mainstream audiences and sponsors, while also being sub textually obvious enough so that queer audiences can recognize the “hidden meanings” present in the text. Therefore, the aforementioned close relationships are more acceptable when using female/female pairings since it is easier to allow them to be intimately close while still hiding under the veil of friendship.

For instance, in friendships, characters regardless of gender, display some form of physical closeness, such as hugging each other. Nevertheless, the way in which this is displayed will differ in accordance with the social norms which explains the restricted physical intimacy among men. Taking for instance Danny and Steve from *Hawaii Five-0* (2010-2020), even though they are very close and say, “I love you.” to each other, the way in which they embrace resembles that of “close pals” who are friends and give each other pats in the back. Even if they are emotionally open to one another, physically they do not reach the heights of Rizzles and Supercorp, this to show that the way in which each genders' sexuality and behavior is regulated is also sub textually depicted on screen. Thus, albeit for instance with shows, such as *Supernatural* which was heavily accused of queerbaiting, Dean and Castiel were rather closed off both emotional and physically. In TV Series in which the couple being accused is composed of women, they are much more intimate with one another, from kisses to back hugging, physical intimacy is more easily accepted and encouraged between them.

Thus, these shows in which the couple at the target of the queerbaiting accusations is a female pair, leads the relationship to be developed in a different manner as it also plays into the enjoyment felt by men when seeing two women being physically intimate

together. Using *Xena: The Princess Warrior* (1995-2001) as an example, the two main characters were very close to one another, in some episodes they even kiss and share baths, and even though this was done due to the popularity of the show within the lesbian community, it also was done with the intent of attracting male viewers. Although those acts are all done under the pretense of close relationships between women, it would be unthinkable to have, for instance, Castiel and Dean sharing kisses in a *Sleeping Beauty* manner, even if it was done under the pretense of homosocial bonds. Throughout the history of Cinema and TV from *Spartacus* (1960) to *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979), there are numerous pairings in which the male leads are rather close and in which their relationship is a major narrative plot. In crime TV Shows with close relationships between the two male leads, specific patterns of gender roles and behavior performance are used to represent these characters in a lighthearted manner that reinforce the idea of the post-feminist man renegotiating its own identity after feminist movements revolutionized the role of the woman in patriarchal society. The portrayals of femininity, however, did not face the same changes as male portrayals, although there are different roles being attributed to women, after entering the labor market, its depictions still follow the inherently attributed roles of motherhood and womanhood. Entering the corporate labor market made a significant change in women's lives as they could now be more financially independent, nevertheless, this did not challenge patriarchal structures since, marriage was still imposed on women.

Therefore, gender is a core aspect that regulates and is regulated, and that controls and is controlled by society. In other words, the performance of gender assures that, while being regulated, it asserts its power over a variety of aspects from colors to the different postures an individual must assume in accordance with their gender. Belonging to a specific gender is an essential part of an individual's identity, thus the ideology of gender as a social construct, which defends that gender is a performance that is not inherently natural, can be destabilizing as it is an essential core foundation of societal order. Before race, sexuality and religion, the very first distinction that is done even before birth is through the presence of male or female genitalia. This is sex, which is biological thus not socially constructed, even so, society compulsively connects gender and sexuality, Therefore, one's identity is initially its sex and only then come the other characteristics. In addition, it is, of the mentioned, together with race, the one that is more likely to be perceived as fixed and stable. Although an individual may go through periods of having

more or less faith it is not expected for an individual to some days feel more feminine and in others more masculine.

This occurrence is gender fluidity which is one of the least depicted forms of queer identities. Even if in recent years there have been renegotiations over the roles of sex in society, these did not breakthrough the fixed ideologies of gender. Furthermore, while transsexual representation in the last years has been increasing, even if at a slow pace compared to other queer identities, gender identity is still represented as fixed throughout and individual's life. Occasionally male characters will dress as women or in more comedic plots altogether pretend to be women, nevertheless by the end of the episode they revert to their fixed masculinity. Nowadays, it is rare to see these depictions as they are too challenging since they can represent the emasculation of male characters. Nonetheless, in the past when actresses were not allowed, for instance in theater, men played the female roles thus having to put up a performance in which they embodied a character of the opposite gender. Albeit not frequent nowadays, there is still backlash whenever men are chosen to play a specific minority over actors who are part of said minority. After playing a transgender woman in *The Danish Girl* (2015), Eddie Redmayne faced backlash and in recent years apologized for having done so (2021).<sup>103</sup> These discriminations occur very frequently in Hollywood more so than in TV, the reason being that after a movie is produced and aired there is no possibility of re-producing it to accommodate the demands of critics and fans, unless there is a sequel or eventually a reboot. In 2012 when *50 Shades of Grey* (2015) was being cast, Matt Bomer's fans signed a petition to have him as the star of the show. However, as an out gay man, he was criticized by Bret Easton Ellis, author of *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) and *American Psycho* (1991) who in a series of tweets stated, "Matt Bomer isn't right for Christian Grey because he is openly gay. [...] Fifty Shades of Grey demands an actor that is genuinely into women." (Abrams, 2012)<sup>104</sup> These tweets were met with disapproval from other users which prompted Ellis to defend himself in subsequent tweets.

The former example shows how there is a preference for white straight men to play these roles instead of casting actors who are part of ostracized minorities. In addition, it is interesting to see that while there is a defense for straight actors to play

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<sup>103</sup> Check <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/nov/22/eddie-redmayne-playing-a-trans-character-in-the-danish-girl-was-a-mistake> to read Eddie Redmayne's beliefs on portraying a transgender character. Accessed 20 May 2023.

<sup>104</sup> <https://www.tvguide.com/news/bret-easton-ellis-matt-bomer-fifty-shades-gay-1051809/> Accessed 28 May 2023.

straight roles, the same criteria is not applied when it is straight actors who are cast to play queer characters as is the case of *Brokeback Mountain* (2015) or more recently in *Tár* (2022). Although by no means these portrayals are “bad”, they are certainly not authentic if the criteria is to be equal on both sides. Authenticity is particularly important to the queer community if one is to look at the depictions of said community throughout the history of Cinema and TV, as rarely would there be a queer actor or director. Thus, making it so that the frequent storylines were rewritten versions of stereotypes, that depict queerness in poor manners. In addition, humor was often used to disarm prejudicial ideas regarding a specific community. Although these stereotypes are not inherently bad per se, they frequently come from a place of ignorance spread by members who are not a part of these communities and whose intent is on controlling and regulating their role in society.

On TV, a frequent stereotype is the depicting of queer struggles as only existent in specific cases that are not related to faults within society, but within isolated characters whose bigotry is a result of their own prejudice. Thus, whenever struggles over the fear of coming out and facing social consequences are voiced, heterosexual characters are prone to diminish these fears without trying to comprehend how this requires a safe environment and a deep understanding of one’s sexuality and identity. In addition to this, a key aspect in understanding why coming out processes are more complex than just “owning up” to the sexuality, relate to the expected performativity of queer individuals. Not only is the coming out process a way for one to be accepted into the queer community it also requires a specific type of behavior from the queer and heterosexual communities alike. In media depictions of queer gay men, it is expected for them to be feminine, promiscuous and to be very fashionable, to the delight of their female counterparts who often refer to them as their “gay best friend” who likes make-up and buying clothes. This speaks to the expected performance of queer individuals to fit in the regulatory norms in order to be accepted by society. Although in recent years there has been more inclusivity in the way in which the queer community accepts members who are not the average feminine gay man and masculine lesbian woman, on TV this inclusivity is murky.

Queer inclusivity is an aspect of authenticity that fans have been advocating for since Ellen’s coming out as a lesbian woman on national television became a key moment in queer (television) history. This occurred in 1997 and although since then many more queer characters have appeared in cable and national TV, these

appearances have not deviated from the representations of queerness that were seen in much earlier years. By this I am referring to the different sexualities that are composed within the queer spectrum, from asexual lesbians to transgender bi men, there are very little representations that deviate from the easily digested white gay man who is rich and artistic. Even though there is a clear movement towards inclusivity, *Euphoria* (2019-present) being a representation of it as it contains a transgender woman as a main character, this is still one in various TV Series that are produced each year which contain a token queer character that is either a gay man or a lesbian woman both being white. Nevertheless, TV Shows like *Pose* (2018-2021), created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals, broadcasted on FX, which focuses on the lives of the African American and Latino LGBTQIA+ communities throughout the 80s and 90s, show that the industry is moving towards new depictions of the queer community. With a cast composed of diversified races, genders and sexualities the show went on to win four Primetime Emmys and was widely acclaimed by critics for displaying the true aspects of the AIDS crisis that aggravated the homophobia and transphobia felt by that community, as well as the social impact it had on gender and race (Ramaswamy, 2019).<sup>105</sup>

Media is just now breaking away from the coming out stories and sexual identity diasporas and moving towards an era in which storylines, regardless of the characters' sexual identity, do not solely focus on their labels. However, while these new storylines are still few and far between, with labels disappearing, sexualities as fixed concepts are challenged by notions of sexual fluidity. Concurrently, although sexual fluidity is a rather important notion that media is evolving towards, it is also fundamental to consider that, even if fans advocate for it, there is a fine line between what is the sexual fluidity that they wish to be represented and the one they do not wish for. At the moment, whenever queerbaiting accusations occur, fans who disagree with these accusations will refute their claims by saying that, said character is heterosexual therefore there is no point in queer coding them or is there any point in turning the character "gay". To which those accusing the show will respond by bringing up the concept of sexual fluidity and of discovering different sexualities at a later stage in life. Nevertheless, if the opposite were to occur, in which a queer character would become heterosexual, fans would complain that their representations were disappearing and that queer characters were being straight washed.

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<sup>105</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/mar/21/pose-review-ryan-murphy-show-voguing-underground-ballroom-new-york> Accessed 8 Jun. 2023.

Even though these notions are progressive, they are at risk of becoming exactly what they advocate against.

In recent years, many TV Shows, across different networks have been accused of using queer codes and homoerotic sexual tension to attract queer viewers, throughout this work two of those shows which were accused of said practices were analyzed. Despite them being produced by different networks the techniques used, from close physical acts to romantic songs used in emotionally charged moments to constantly putting each other at the top of their priorities, are very similar across all shows. Whilst these techniques are popular within media, it becomes especially troubling whenever this subtext, although present in text, is promptly denied if it does not meet the expectations of the creator. Using the popular character of Sherlock Holmes created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, even though originally the character died and the series following his adventures ended, due to fan requests the character was brought back and its story continued (Armstrong, 2016).<sup>106</sup> Despite it being an adaptation, thus giving some creative liberty to the producers, with Sherlock many complaints came from the obvious on-screen homoerotic tension that was denied by the creator as something that existed only in the heads of delusional fans.

In the shows analyzed here, although the relationships between producers and audiences did not reach the point of the former describing fans as “delusional fan girls”, there was distrust and even disdain towards the networks for allowing the shows to continue with the blatant queerbaiting. In the case of *Rizzoli & Isles* it was clear early on that the relationship between the main characters was to be interpreted as rather close. However, both actresses and producer erased any expectations of them becoming a couple, if not by the frequent assurance that they were heterosexual in interviews, by the multiple heterosexual relationships that each character had. Nonetheless, throughout the seasons even after it was clear that fans would like for them to become a couple, and their readings of the pairing as more than just friends were not the product of wishful reading, producers still kept the homoerotic tension while denying any possible consummation of said tension on-screen. Very close relationships between the leads are popular because they save screen time and decrease the number of sets to film in, as shown by Rizzoli spending so much time at Isle’s house that at the very least they could be mistaken for roommates. There is a clear difference of close relationships between opposite sex leads and same-sex leads, while the former frequently leads to romantic relationships, with

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<sup>106</sup> See <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160106-how-sherlock-holmes-changed-the-world> for a detailed exposure over the popularity of Sherlock Holmes. Accessed 31 May 2023.



some rare exceptions such as CBS's *Elementary* (2012-2019) in which there was no intent on having a romantic relationship, or TV Shows such as *Lie to Me* (2009-2011) which are cancelled early on thus not allowing the relationship to develop. The latter is eternally stuck on the realm of close platonic relationships, which is perfectly acceptable by audiences even if it shows how society categorizes all relationships between same-sex pairings as just close relationships in which there is no romantic and/or sex interest.

This acceptance is key in understanding why audiences are so prone to reject possible romantic relationships between same-sex pairings. Throughout the organization of society, homosocial bonds have allowed for a structure in which members of the same gender can be socially close to one another, even favoring this form of relationships over those with the opposite gender. Although these are the core of patriarchal society, after post-feminist and queer movements there was a need for the role of men to be negotiated which allowed for different representations of not just women, but also their own relationships with the same gender. As Sasha Alexander stated, the actress who portrays Maura Isles, in media, women often fight with one another over men and there is very little space for bonds between them to develop as they are often seen as rivals in their quest for love. In the early 2010s the relationship between Jane and Maura was revolutionary exactly because it did not involve a rivalry over love interests, it was a crime procedural show with two leading women which were not constantly gossiping about love interests and bad mouthing each other. The show, for all its faults, passes the Bechdel Test, even if in recent years this test has been criticized for its oversimplification of female relationships.<sup>107</sup>

However, while the show was innovative in its depictions of female relationships, it still fell into the same queerbaiting techniques such as using humor to disarm the harmful although subtle messages played on-screen, which allows characters to venture into the realm of being more daring for the sake of comedy. While at the same time not being taken seriously since it is just for laughs that the characters make an off-handed comment regarding the possibility of being queer. Being these depictions the only possibility of even having a modicum of representation, queerness is always seen as a joke instead of a real possibility. Characters are allowed to play up to a certain point if it

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<sup>107</sup> The Bechdel Test created by Alison Bechdel is used to measure the representation of women in fiction. In order to pass this test a piece of media must have two women in it, they must talk to each other, and the object of their conversation must be something other than a man. Although criticized for propagating feminist ideology initially the test was created to show the gender inequality in fiction.

stays within the realm of comedy, this is why the 6<sup>th</sup> episode of the 1<sup>st</sup> season of *Rizzoli & Isles* is so interesting from a queerbaiting standpoint. It shows viewers just how far the characters will go before retracting back to their “undeniable” heterosexuality. Simultaneously, they reassure the viewers that although they are very close, they are not each other’s types, which is all done in a manner that is playful and lighthearted. Even the scenes in which they pretend to be a couple are clearly done to withdraw laughs from the mainstream audiences, although it could be funny; for queer audiences this is just another way in which their sexualities and expectations are toyed with. Although this is designed to contrast with the “serious” heterosexual relationships, besides alluring queer audiences it also has the purpose of being arousing to the male-gaze since these are two good looking women that are very close to one another. Paired with this, when they pretend to be a couple, they do so to avoid a male character and to prevent him from pursuing Maura. These are perfect examples on how female sexuality is seen as an object of desire for men but also how it is regulated by men, not only does their relationship not deter male advances, but it is also seen as alluring and desirable.

On matters regarding the relationship between producers and audiences, in the case of *Rizzoli & Isles* although the relationship was not as estranged as of some other TV Shows accused of queerbaiting. Since both sides were aware of the blatant techniques used, mostly due to the fact that lead actress Angie Harmon admitted to playing up to homoerotic tension on screen. Audiences did not enjoy Angie Harmon’s frequent assertions that denied the character’s sexuality, this is interesting because Jane Rizzoli is the queerest coded character and through performance and gender behavior, she is the depiction of a closeted Butch lesbian. Thus, it is impressive for a character that is heavily queer coded, to have its actress express her dislike towards the fan edits that portrayed her as the “man” in the hypothetical relationship between her and Maura. Although this portrayal of Jane as the most masculine of the two therefore making her the man in the relationship is also deeply connected with the gender bias and performances attributed to lesbian relationships, the show itself did not challenge the hegemonic discourse when it comes to women in power in law enforcement. Therefore, these readings that the audiences made of their possible relationship is in line with what the network portrays on screen, as even Harmon stated that women in law enforcement frequently must hide their more feminine side and assume a more masculine stance.

This brings me to speak of the final and other important product that comes out of queerbaiting in media which is that of queer fan labor. As aforementioned, one of the

main reasons as to why these techniques are employed so often is directly connected with marketing. Using for instance social media platforms, networks can be free of responsibility, when the accounts in those platforms make statements that lure viewers through possible queer representations leading them to enter the community of the show with false expectations. When these expectations are not met, textual poaching is used, from fan edits to fan fiction, fans can appropriate the original text and manipulate it to best fulfill their fantasies. Since these are shared across several social media platforms it allows shows to trend frequently bringing attention and popularity, at the same time networks must recognize when the queer community is gaining too much traction. Taking *Xena: The Princess Warrior* and *Sherlock* as two examples, in the former, the producers were aware that the community enjoyed the possibility of them becoming a couple and encouraged fanfics in which the main actresses are in a romantic relationship, to be shared among the fans. In *Sherlock*, producer Steven Moffatt on the other hand deeply despised any fanfic which contained John and Sherlock in a relationship leading to moments in which he insulted the fans. The case of *Rizzoli & Isles* is interesting as although actresses sometimes denied the possibility of them being canon, in other words, of them ever becoming a romantic couple, they, together with producer Janet Tamaro were supportive of those with different theories and readings of the couple.

Ultimately albeit an innovative show, *Rizzoli & Isles* uses techniques that allure the queer community, by portraying the main characters as very close, leading others to sometimes mistake them for a married couple and by queer coding heterosexual characters. From Jane Rizzoli's hypothetical scenarios of being gay to pretending to be in a lesbian couple, there is no denial that the show knew that fans enjoyed her performance as a closeted butch lesbian, as well as the sexual tension between her and Maura. Thus, the network decided to depict it as much as possible, without ever fully actualizing it by having them in frequent heterosexual relationships which never led anywhere. In addition, to this upsetting misleading behavior on the network's part, communities took it to social media to be vocal regarding the blatant queerbaiting techniques employed. Nevertheless, these fell on deaf ears and, until the very end, the show maintained the plausible deniability of them becoming a couple. Naturally, the actresses' ambiguous comments on the possibility of the nature of their relationship ever being sexual did not put a stop to the fantasies of fans who wished to see them together. Furthermore, as is the case of *Sherlock*, this TV Show was also adapted from a book series and the producers chose to deviate, in some respects from the original work. These

deviations occurred primarily on a romantic level, from Jane's marriage with Casey to Maura's ex-husband barely even being mentioned, it was clear that changes in the relationships were allowed if they were done in a heterosexual level. In the heterosexually compulsory world of *Rizzoli & Isles*, the option of being queer only appears as a possibility that is not shared by any of the characters in the main cast. Although Jane and Maura display romantic tropes seen in heterosexual couples, and even though there is on-screen chemistry between the actresses which could lead one to interpret them as a lesbian couple, it is never considered by either of them beyond the realm of comedy. Ultimately, although a rather revolutionary show it did not explore the complex relationships between women, nor did it try to depict the subtle ways in which compulsory heterosexuality is asserted in hegemonic discourse. By naturally classifying the intimate relationships between women as close homosocial bonds which inherently include physical and emotional intimacy, it is difficult to recognize when the appeal in the homosocial bond goes beyond close friendship and ventures into the territory of romantic and sexual interest.

This confusion in recognizing whether attraction to the same gender is the product of hegemonic discourse or whether it is the product of sexual and romantic desire is seen in *Supergirl*. Alex Danvers was, for a long time, unable to interpret her own feelings as that of anything besides the expected intimate relationships between women. *Supergirl* (2016-2021) is a CBS and CW TV Series, which was praised for a variety of different achievements on TV, however, as with many CW TV Series, it did not manage to free itself from queerbaiting accusations. From *The 100th* (2014-2020) to *Supernatural* (2005-2020) to *Riverdale* (2017-2023), CW manages to have the highest percentage of queer representation, while at the same time being the producer of a multiple TV Shows that use queerbaiting practices. One of these achievements is the introduction of TV's first transgender superhero, Nia Nal, the network was praised for its depiction because this character is part of the main cast and does not exist just to fill in quotas. Although a few of the episodes do focus on her identity as a transgender woman, her storyline develops beyond that and, for viewers who do not keep up with the show, her being transgender could even be easily forgotten. Concurrently, this character was also allowed to have a romantic relationship, as well as having a storyline in which she discovers her powers and becomes a superhero. Even though her persona relates to her transsexuality, it is still rare to see storylines that do not primarily follow the expected coming out/finding their identity storyline.

On the matters of representation, besides Nia Nal there are other characters such as Alex Danvers, the sister of Kara Danvers, Supergirl, which throughout the TV Show has two lesbian relationships. Her coming out storyline occurred in season 2, after the TV Show had been allocated to CW and it was praised for its authentic representation of one's discovery of an alternative sexuality. The reason being that her first lesbian relationship, with Maggie Sawyer, which was a character that helped her in her coming out process, did not initially follow through; in other words, at first Alex was rejected by Maggie. This was praised by critics and fans since, in queer representation, those that introduce you to the queer community are often the ones that you end up with, when frequently your first love is not the one that you end up with. Even so, the way in which this relationship ended followed a very cliched plot, in which Alex Danvers wanted to have children, whereas Maggie Sawyer, her girlfriend, did not, leading them to break up. As aforementioned, lesbians wanting to have children is a very popular trope within queer representation and, in this case, audiences felt as if it was a very easy way of writing Maggie off the show. Their ending felt rushed and was criticized as only being slightly better than having used the “bury your gays” trope to deal with the actress leaving the show.

It is also important to understand that when it comes to queer representation through subtext, audiences are quick to deem them as “good” or “bad” representation. These notions do not follow specific unbiased criteria on how to judge a couple or a character as good or a bad representation of the queer community. Nevertheless, the way in which audiences do judge fictional narratives and characters on screen, is done through the usage of tropes and storylines seen in heterosexual couples, for instance, the most popular example of a good representation of a queer couple would be marriage and children. These are linked to questions of affectivity and happiness; it is important that in “good” representations queer characters achieve the happy ending linked to notions of heteronormativity. Happiness represents a key part in good representations, considering that in the past very rarely would characters ever be allowed to have their happy ending, in other words, queer characters were always either dead or isolated by the end of the narrative. A TV Show praised for its queer depiction was *The Fosters* (2013-2018) produced by ABC, whose narrative focuses on a lesbian married couple who fosters teenagers. In addition, the premise of the show also deals with their struggles in a manner that does not downplay the bigotry and prejudice that queer couples must face in matters of adoption and fostering. In *Supergirl's* case, Alex Danver's happy ending inserts itself directly into these notions of happiness, by the end of the final season she gets married to

Kelly Olsen and they adopt a child. Although the focus of this work is not to criticize these “good” or “bad” representations, it is interesting to analyze that they are only considered good if they are connected to heteronormativity and bad if they are the opposite of what the heterosexual couples achieve in the end.

Not only is queer representation then directly connected with heteronormativity but so is queerbaiting, since, just like Alex Danvers, characters at the center of the queerbaiting accusations, possibly fail to recognize that their feelings go beyond close friendships between women. As Adrienne Rich argues, with conforming sexuality being imposed on women, any deviation from the norm is either dismissed through homosocial bonds or seen as a ploy to attract men. The pleasure that homoeroticism among women brings to men is a reason as to why queerbaiting often occurs between very feminine women. Thus, there is a direct link between stereotypical femininity and queerbaiting accusations. In addition to this, in queerbaiting, there is a particular characteristic seen across all the mentioned shows, which is that of centrality. Characters at the center of the narrative are the ones on which audiences are most focused, they are the faces of the TV Show, which brings the questions as to why networks are so interested in queer coding the ones who “sell” the show, since this not only could create conflicts with the sponsors but also, if it is blatant enough it could cause the show to be censored or even banned in other regions of the world. However, these accusations are difficult to prove, considering that there is no specific interpretation which can be deemed as the correct one. Therefore, while in some interactions between Kara and Lena, certain viewers could be reading their relationship as that of a close friendship, to others their relationship could be read as that of lovers.

As accusations mostly occur online, they are quick to be dismissed as threats to the economic survival of the show. Even so as has been argued throughout this work, queerbaiting is not based solely on audience interpretations. Besides the more popular technique of leaving the original text ambiguous enough so that audiences will interpret it in different manners, in the case of *Supergirl* there are numerous parallels between Kara and Lena and other romantic couples within the Arrowverse. For avid viewers who are aware of the other shows that are interconnected with *Supergirl*, it is clear that Kara and Lena’s relationship easily mirrors that of other shows, such as Barry and Iris West from *Flash* (2014-2023). Although it could be argued that the parallels are, from the standpoint of the narrative, a way to establish these shows as connected to one another, it is interesting that of all of the shows with whom *Supergirl* has parallels with, they are the

only one in which the parallels are applied to a non-romantic couple. Simultaneously, it could also be argued that, with the Arrowverse having already two heterosexual main couples and one lesbian couple, depicting a central non-romantic female relationship was done to depict different relationships among the characters. Nevertheless, if this was the intent, then it comes into question why much effort was put into, first, establishing romantic parallels between pairings who are married and pairings who are friends, and second, even using social media platforms to allude to the possibility of them becoming a couple.

This brings me to a final element in queer baiting accusations in media, which is that of relationships between producers and audiences. Despite these being rather complex, it is expected of producers to accept that audience members are bound to come up with their own theories regarding specific narratives. Whether these are or are not accepted by producers, especially in cases in which there is clear intent on subtly depicting them on screen, it frequently leads the relationships to be rather hostile on both sides. On screen depictions of the queer community are rather hard to negotiate, as they are frequently left in the realm of the closet and in the realm of possible fantasies. However, even though in the past it was impossible to have them acknowledged as there was censorship in place, nowadays, networks do not face similar restrictions. Therefore, even if producers do not wish to alter the course of a storyline to better fit with the expectations of the audiences, at the very least, they could acknowledge that these are a possibility, as is the case of executive producer Janet Tamaro, when she recognized that audiences of *Rizzoli & Isles* were coming up with theories in which these two characters are together in a romantic relationship. In the case of *Supergirl*, from cast members to screenwriters, it was clear that acceptance towards those who were reading the relationship between Kara and Lena as a romantic one was not possible. This led to a rather unpleasant relationship, and at the end of the series, fans criticized not only the fact that these two characters did not become a couple but even other storylines which they felt were subpar.

*Supergirl* was the first show to introduce a transgender superhero whose story was praised for being well developed and for showing the prejudices that transgender individuals face. Concurrently, it also had two lesbian couples. Even though their depictions fit heteronormative notions of romantic relationships through marriage and children, they were still praised for their authentic depiction of lesbian relationships. These depictions serve as an example on how fans regulate “good” and “bad”

representations. Considering that representations shape the way in which queerness is seen, “good” representations are advocated for; however, since they are deeply rooted in the expectation of each viewer, it is not possible to regulate them. Furthermore, in representations of minorities, questions of authenticity are also a dominant issue, especially due to the propagation of stereotypes such as the “U-Haul” Lesbian or the “Flaming Queen”, which only show specific sides of the queer community. Although *Supergirl* does rely heavily on lesbian stereotypes to develop Alex Danver’s storyline, it was accused of queerbaiting leading to unpleasant relationships not just between audiences and producers, but even within the community as matters related to the possible relationships of Lena and Kara could lead to fan wars on Reddit and Tumblr.

As has been shown throughout this work, specific codes and symbols are read as signifiers of queerness. These are frequently used by producers to allure queer audiences. Interestingly, it seems that codes such as the masculine dyke and the curious, open-minded feminine woman are becoming universal to the point that even mainstream audiences are noticing this subtle subtext devices. Moreover, specifically in the case of TV, there is a long-term commitment with the stories and with the characters, considering an emotional attachment. In the case of death or tragic endings, audiences report feelings of sadness and even depressive thoughts. In the case of queerness, the effects that the representations have on the audiences which identify as queer is even more important, as this is an oppressed group that, when represented on screen, suffered from tragic endings (suicide, isolation, death). Therefore, as has been established, “good” representations or, in other words, representations with “happy endings”, are the ones that queer audiences wish to see. Nevertheless, this happiness is regulated by the possibility of marriage and children, thus applying heteronormative values onto queer couples. Ultimately, it should be kept in mind that these shows both used the concept of queerness as in the “other” to lure in viewers with the possibility of a topic that is still taboo to be discussed, that of queer representation.

This work focused mostly on how queerbaiting not only reinforced heteronormativity but also how the techniques differed from female to male same sex leads. In both pairings analyzed here the leads were both straight, white, cisgender American women, which means that the data analyzed here is restricted to these parameters. Furthermore, the shows analyzed here are also restricted to the period between 2010 – 2020, as mentioned. Recently there has been a shift towards more representation within the different sexualities of the queer spectrum, as well as a move



towards an era in which labels will no longer be needed and characters may be developed without overt focus on their sexual identity. Future research should be done regarding the dynamics between relationships in which one of the characters belongs to the queer spectrum and there is racial diversity between the leads. In addition, it would be in the best interests of future works to focus on how networks with low percentage of queer characters portray the different dynamics between same-sex heterosexual pairings and how different queerbaiting techniques are used to reflect these dynamics.

Additional research could also be applied to celebrity queerbaiting, specifically focusing on the importance of LGBTQIA+ actors portraying LGBTQIA+ characters, which would require actors to publicly discuss their sexuality. Just last year (2022), Kit Connor, famous for playing Nick in Netflix's adaptation of *Heartstopper* (2022-), received media backlash over claims of alluding to be a member of the queer community without confirming to which label he fell under. After months of no interaction with fans, the actor came back with the tweet "i'm bi. congrats for forcing an 18 year old to out himself." Moreover, an interesting approach to take is to look into how the presence of different sexualities and genders within the cast and crew of a show affects the representations on screen, and how audiences react to them when they come from a place of authenticity.

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